Signal Studies

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/35654062.

Rating:
Explicit

Archive Warnings:
No Archive Warnings Apply, Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings

Category:
M/M

Fandom:
Karate Kid (Movies)

Relationship:
Daniel LaRusso/Johnny Lawrence

Characters:
Daniel LaRusso, Johnny Lawrence, Ali Mills (Karate Kid), Susan (Karate Kid), Barbara (Karate Kid)

Additional Tags:
the surreal ordeal of being crushed on by the worst person you know, aggressively passive daniel, frantically berserk johnny, Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, nonviolence

Language:
English

Series:
Part 1 of Tuning

Stats:
Published: 2021-12-12 Completed: 2022-01-28 Words: 59,957 Chapters: 50/50

Signal Studies

by menocchio

Summary

“He's staring again,” whispers Barbara.

Library

“He's staring again,” whispers Barbara.

“Seriously?” Daniel glances over his shoulder across the library to where Johnny Lawrence is sitting, ostentatiously not doing any studying.

The moment their gazes lock together, the other boy widens his eyes like he thinks *Daniel* is being the weird, staring freak. Daniel can almost hear the high sneer, *what are you looking at, twerp?* And jesus, if he can call the guy's voice to mind that easily, clearly this has all been going on a little too long.

Daniel stops sucking on his pencil eraser and waves the utensil cheerily at him. He throws in a sarcastic smile for good measure, and feels vaguely victorious when Johnny flushes and looks away.

Things had been weird since Mr. Miyagi and the Cobra Kai sensei made the agreement about the tournament. Johnny and his friends aren't allowed to hit Daniel, but that doesn't mean they are above hassling him in other ways. Shoving past him in the hallways, knocking his books from his hands, stupid stunts in the cafeteria – anything short of actually hurting him is game, and Johnny always seems real eager to play.

“Ali's not even here,” he says to Barbara. “What is *with* this guy?”

“I guess he just has it in for you,” she says.

Daniel shakes his head and, after one last look at the ducked blond head, returns to his physics textbook and the complicated mysteries of magnetic forces.

Twenty minutes later, he gets up to use the bathroom. He is making his way back to his table when a hand shoots out from behind one of the library stacks and shoves him sideways. Daniel gets a face full of copies of *The Chocolate War*, and Johnny behind him saying:

“Better watch where you're going next time.”

“But you're doing such a good job watching for the both of us,” says Daniel to the floor, rubbing his forehead. Of course it had to be *The Chocolate War*. God forbid he get shoved into something more cheerful

or inspiring.

Johnny grabs him by the front of his shirt and pulls Daniel skating forward, his chin bouncing and limbs twitching in an instinctive flinch. Jeez.

“What is that supposed to mean?” demands Johnny, and doesn't this guy ever get tired?

Honestly, the scene feels like it doesn't even need Daniel's input to continue. If only he could close his eyes, check out completely. When he opens them again, Johnny will have finished his threats and maybe shoved him once or twice more, and they can both get on with their day.

What's the thing Jerry says in the book, when he's beat and miserable at the end? Maybe it's better not to disturb the universe.

So Daniel tries that; Johnny pulls him in, and he closes his eyes and lets the universe take him.

With his eyes closed, he can't see the twisting fury of the other boy's face, but he can hear the harshness of his breathing, how it's labored like he ran clear across the valley to find himself right here, holding Daniel. He can feel the way his shirt is pulled tight in the front in Johnny's large fist, how it drags at his collar and shoulders.

“What,” says Johnny, “what are you doing?” And he sounds different. Nervous.

That's interesting, thinks Daniel, and he puts his head back a little, tilts it like he might hear better. And maybe he *does*, because then he notices how Johnny's breathing changes, quickens.

“Stop that!” says Johnny, voice edged in panic.

Daniel pictures himself standing on the prow of Mr. Miyagi's rowboat. There is wind and motion all around him, but he can be completely still. Maybe he can be so still, Johnny Lawrence will suddenly stop being able to see him. Maybe Daniel is one with the library stacks, blending backwards into the depressing young adult literature. And one thing is for certain, he does go backwards into the stacks, because Johnny pushes him hard into them a second later.

Daniel opens his eyes. Johnny is staring at him, color high in his cheeks, something like terror ducking for cover behind the ever-ready

anger. Interesting, he thinks again, and then: ow! Because Johnny kind of punches his chest.

“What the hell was that?” demands Johnny.

“What do you know about magnetism?” asks Daniel.

Johnny's face twists. *“What?”*

“It's what we're studying in physics right now,” he explains. “And what I was trying to read about, before you decided to interrupt my study hall.”

“I didn't interrupt anything,” says Johnny hotly.

He seems to realize he still has a hand in Daniel's shirt and releases him like he's abruptly become allergic to cheap polyester blends. He takes a step back, down the row towards the study tables.

“This is your fault,” he says, pointing at him. “You're the one who started closing your eyes and standing around like a freak.”

“Interesting,” says Daniel.

Johnny's hands ball into fists and he looks around wildly before reaching for the nearest book – unfortunately for Daniel, this is *The Fountainhead:* so goddamn long and quite the missile when chucked by someone really putting their arm into it, which Johnny does.

The narrow space between the stacks doesn't allow for much dodging. He takes the hit from pedantic individualism on his shoulder and sighs a little.

“Just leave me alone,” snaps Johnny, finally turning around.

“I'll try,” Daniel calls after him, because it's really, really hard not to have the last word with that guy. He watches the back of Johnny's neck go red and shakes his head.

Barbara looks up as he slides back into his seat at the table and pulls his physics textbook close.

“You were kind of gone a while, where'd you go?” she asks.

“I was making peace with the universe,” says Daniel.

He glances over automatically at Johnny, who is balancing his chair

back on two legs and staring again. Their eyes meet, and the other boy breaks off staring with such violence, he overtips and he and the chair fall backwards with a loud clatter.

“Interesting,” says Daniel.

Locker

Daniel has spent months trying to make himself scarce, because he isn't an idiot and it just made sense: don't want to get your ass kicked, avoid the guy perpetually winding his leg back. But after the moment in the library during study hall, he starts to wonder.

He hasn't been to his locker since the first week of school. He keeps all his texts and notebooks stashed in a network of girls' lockers: History and Calc in Ali's, Physics in Susan's, Econ in Barbara's.

Sure we're not taking things too fast? he'd joked with Ali when she realized he was carrying all his books with him everywhere and insisted on sharing her space. *You asking me to move in like this, I mean?*

She hugged her notebook to her chest and grinned. *Just don't expect me to cook dinner every night. I'm a modern woman.*

(The others hadn't been nearly so fun and flirtatious about it. Susan folded her arms and said, *it's like having the little brother I never wanted – touch my stuff and die*, whereas Barbara had taken his polite expression of appreciation of her photos of George Michael and gotten it into her head she'd found a fellow devotee. So now he has to learn facts about Wham! in the spirit of being a good neighbor, great.)

Anyway, maybe it was time to take control of his destiny and return to his locker. His locker, which was right next to Johnny Lawrence's locker.

Call him curious. (He's been called worse.) He just wants to test a theory.

He plays it casual after fifth period, walking down the hall with his Physics and Econ books, nodding his head like he has some internal music going on up there and not, like, a mantra of self doubt and recrimination. No stakes to see here, folks! Besides, the odds of Johnny being at his locker at precisely the same moment between classes has to be so small. The guy can barely read, probably. What does he need textbooks for?

But Johnny is at his locker. Johnny is ducking his head to check his stupid blond fringe in the little square mirror on the inside of the door and talking to Tommy.

Daniel wonders what they talk about. In his experience, the other boy's conversational repertoire consisted of whining and threats with the occasional parroting of his karate dojo's creepy slogans. And yet, every time Daniel sees the guy with his friends, they seem to be stringing together whole paragraphs of sentences.

“Do not disturb the universe,” says Daniel under his breath, and he puts his head back and clears his expression. He approaches his locker.

Johnny has turned to Tommy and doesn't see him, so Daniel ducks behind his open locker door. He is of a somewhat – it has been remarked upon, on occasion – diminutive stature; maybe Johnny won't even see him behind the locker door.

Daniel reaches for his lock and pauses, staring at the black dial of numbers.

He has forgotten his combination.

Hm.

36, 10 – no, that's too close to Barbara's, he's getting them confused.

Hm.

Flash of teal to his left as Johnny slams his locker closed. Daniel feels the larger body pause from inches away and slides an innocent look over.

Johnny plants his hand on the locker and leans forward, eyes unblinking; mouth pinching. “What,” he says, inching forward in his loom, “do you think you're doing?”

“Well, you see, years ago, in response to the growing uh, girth of knowledge held in school textbooks, the American public school system responded by providing every student with a locker,” and the weird thing is, the moment he starts talking, his fingers seem to remember what to do with the combination. Muscle memory: incredible. Maybe Mr. Miyagi is really on to something with all those chores?

The dial spins clockwise. Daniel smiles a little up at Johnny and says, “I have Econ next period, and it's clear across the building.”

The dial spins counterclockwise for a turn. “And it just seems awfully

inconvenient to haul my Physics book along for the ride."

The dial spins clockwise again. "Besides, can't be bringing a science book into an econ classroom, teachers of social sciences can be a little sensitive—"

He's just pulling the locker open when Johnny snaps and shoves him against the door, banging it closed again. Daniel grits his teeth and puts his head back. His eyes dart over Johnny's face, but it's difficult because it is suddenly very close to his own.

"You talk too much," says Johnny.

Daniel opens his mouth to reply; reconsiders; shuts his mouth and makes a slight face. He keeps his eyes on Johnny, who seems to be waiting for some kind of response. When he doesn't get one, his eyes narrow. He shifts in, threatening, and Daniel keeps his body completely relaxed.

He is water; Johnny may think he can hold him, but it's inevitable he'll slip away.

(Like, probably.)

Johnny shoves him into the locker and steps back fast. "You're doing that thing again, *stop it.*"

"Johnny, man, we gotta get to English," says Tommy, giving Daniel a weird look. But Daniel is like water; he tries to return nothing but a serene reflection.

"You better not be here when I get back," says Johnny to Daniel.

"Be weird if I was. I got class, too, pal," he says, and he can't help but flinch slightly when the other boy feints at him with a fist raised. This whole thing is a work in progress, alright?

Johnny and Tommy disappear down the hallway, and Daniel takes a long careful breath. He turns back to his locker. His hand goes to the combination, and he pauses, staring at the dial.

Hm.

Miyagi

Daniel blocks a fast-moving fist. “Hey, can I ask you something?”

“Focus,” says Mr. Miyagi. “No talking in tournament.”

He blocks a kick. “Wait, that an actual rule or something?”

“*Focus*,” said Mr. Miyagi instead of answering, which by now Daniel was starting to suspect meant he didn't actually know.

People around the building usually seem to assume Mr. Miyagi knows everything, and while he certainly knows a lot – like more than anyone Daniel's ever met – Daniel is starting to catch on to some of the man's little quirks. Like when Mr. Morales stopped them one morning outside the apartments and asked him when the raccoon problem out by the dumpsters was going to be taken care of – Mr. Miyagi had changed the subject, never actually told the man it was being addressed. Mr. Morales just walked away assuming. But Mr. Miyagi told Daniel the owner was dragging his feet, something to do with a dispute with the person who owned the empty lot next door, and who was responsible for the fence, but hey, there was nothing Mr. Miyagi could do about it.

Anyway, Daniel doesn't think Mr. Miyagi knows whether talking is allowed during the All Valley.

“Well, can I ask you something after?” he persists, blocking two strikes in quick succession.

Mr. Miyagi sighs and stops, straightening. Daniel keeps his hands up but he raises his eyebrows, expectant.

Mr. Miyagi gestures, and Daniel smiles.

“Right, so – I was wondering. If it came down to you and that guy, the sensei from that dojo – do you think you could take him?”

“Miyagi not want him.”

Daniel rolls his eyes. “Yeah, ha ha. Right. But like – let's say you're surrounded and don't have a choice, and he throws a punch your way.... What would you do?”

Mr. Miyagi considers it and says, “Duck.”

Daniel puts a hand on his hip and taps his fingers. He chews his lip and regards the man.

“Always duck,” Mr. Miyagi elaborates. “Efficient use of body. Better for joints. Also – makes opponent look very foolish.”

Okay, now they're talking. This is closer to what Daniel's been thinking about.

“But what if people say you're a coward?” People will almost certainly call Daniel a coward. “Wouldn't that bother you?”

He doesn't say anything at first, just looks away across the field towards the setting sun. Daniel watches him and does not fidget.

“Bother Miyagi more if forced to fight when Miyagi not want fight,” he says at last. “Choice must be own, Daniel-san. Miyagi know – not coward. All that matters.”

Daniel thinks about the tournament in December, and he thinks of Johnny Lawrence stalking him all around the school every day. Neither of these things much feel like his choice. And he thinks about how Miyagi teaches his karate, turning everything in life into a useful lesson. A way of tilting the world, or maybe tilting how you look at it, and making it work for you.

If waxing a car can become a block, what else can?

Mr. Miyagi beckons. “Again.”

Daniel falls into position and raises his hands.

Cafeteria

Ali slides onto the bench beside him, and he glances up at her with a quick smile before returning to the book he has propped in front of him on the lunch table. She leans forward to peer at the cover and reads aloud:

"*The Politics of Nonviolent Action* by Gene Sharpe." She sits back, bemused, and reaches for her fork. "That for a class?"

"Uh, more of a personal project," says Daniel vaguely. He doesn't want to get too into it; sometimes he thinks his blossoming relationship with Ali is a little too centered around the fact that he gets shoved around by her ex-boyfriend.

"Heavy reading for lunch," she comments. "Is it any good?"

"It says power is not monolithic."

"What's that mean?"

He flashes a smile. "No idea."

Barbara arrives at the table and Ali turns to talk to her, and Daniel loses himself in the comfort of their voices nearby as he reads. There's something so easy about their company and the way they've let him into it. He thinks he could be almost happy here if it wasn't for—

Right on cue, a hand comes down over his vision and snatches the book out of his hands. A sharp hyena bark of laughter nearby tells him who is responsible before he can react, and when he does react – immediately, unthinking as he shoots to his feet and turns – he is not surprised to find Johnny with his friends standing behind him.

"Give that back," he says, because his brain hasn't caught up. Later, he'll burn over it: saying those words. Because when has a bully ever obeyed them; there's humiliation even in asking.

This is something Johnny understands; the moment Daniel speaks, his face transforms with a smirk. He flips the book between his hands and casts a cursory, disinterested look down at the cover. And he sort of laughs, because he is above all things, a massive idiot.

"What is this nerd shit?"

“Did you have trouble reading the title?” asks Daniel in sympathy. “Those words did contain more than one syllable.”

Johnny's smirk stays, but his eyebrows tilt up: a wordless *oh yeah?* Without looking away from Daniel, he tosses the book into the lunch-streaked garbage can several feet away. And because the universe hates Daniel, he doesn't miss.

Daniel twitches forward: a laughably late attempt to save the book, perhaps, or a lunge at Johnny. He takes a short breath and tries reaching for the calm he's been working on, but it's hard to find. It's different with so many people around watching them: with Ali watching him stand there and not do anything.

Johnny looks at him with expectation, eyes lit up and unblinking. Behind him, his friends snigger.

“Johnny, would you stop being such a jerk,” says Ali, standing up at Daniel's side.

“Yeah, why can't you just leave him alone?” asks Barbara behind them.

“What's this?” Johnny asks him. “First an old man, now you're hiding behind a bunch of girls?”

And of course, Daniel doesn't want anyone protecting him. He hates the idea of needing it, hates the idea of anyone thinking he needs it even more. But the other boy's words are only a hit if he lets them be a hit. In the schema of the world of Johnny Lawrence, girls having your back is humiliating, but if Daniel turns his own shame into a weapon – or a shield, really – if he just—

“Yeah, why not?” he says easily, and he glances at Ali's face to check how she's feeling before wrapping an arm around her waist. “It's the eighties, isn't it?”

Johnny's face turns angry, and then Daniel puts his head down on the edge of Ali's shoulder and smiles at him and his stupid friends, and his face goes perfectly blank.

“Just kick the fairy's ass, Johnny,” says Dutch suddenly behind him.

“Yeah,” pipes up another one, the clueless-looking one who rarely speaks and whose name Daniel still doesn't know. “We won't tell Sensei.”

Daniel tenses. Ali drops a hand down to hold the one he has on her waist. She squeezes it. Johnny's eyes drop to their intertwined hands, and his own drag against the fabric of his chinos as he curls them slowly into tight fists. He takes a step forward.

“No!” calls a strident, wishes-it-was-authoritative voice over the cafeteria. “Hang on! *No* – excuse me, Miss Jefferson, sorry – boys, boys! None of that!”

Mr. Alpert the geometry teacher arrives on the scene, the icy dislike on his face as he surveys them countervailed by the nervous way he pushes his glasses up his nose. It is the universally-recognizable look of a public school teacher who despises his students but knows corporal punishment was outlawed by the school district three years ago.

“Last time you hooligans fought, you overturned three tables and created a mess that took custodial staff hours to clean up,” says Mr. Alpert. “So – it's detention for all of you, I'm afraid.”

“But we haven't done anything yet,” protests Johnny, voice going high with outrage.

“*Yet* being the key word, Mr. Lawrence.”

“When you say 'all of you',” begins Daniel, uneasy.

The teacher's glasses flash as he glares around at Johnny and his friends and then, horrifically, Daniel, Ali, and Barbara. “All of you. Afternoon detention, for – for pre-fighting.”

“My mom's going to have kittens if she hears I got detention for pre-fighting,” says Barbara.

Detention

“Glad I don't have second lunch,” says Susan as she walks them to detention after the last bell. Her voice turns wistful. “Still, I would've liked to seen it: Ali and Barbara getting their first detention.”

“I told you, there was nothing to see, we were busted for *pre-fighting*,” said Barbara, who clearly has a problem letting things go.

“You're a terrible influence,” Susan tells Daniel, who rolls his eyes because give him a break. “I don't know what she sees in you.”

“Hey,” says Ali.

“Sees in *me*?” says Daniel as they reach the door of the classroom where detention is held. He jerks his head at the door, and the cacophony of foolishness they can already hear from inside. “What did she see in King Karate in there?”

“*Hey*,” says Ali.

Susan leans one shoulder against the row of lockers just outside the room and inquires coolly, “You mean, aside from his body and what he can do with it?”

Daniel finds himself wholly without a response to make to this. Meanwhile, Ali shoves the other girl and hisses her name.

“Such violence!” Susan steps back, abandoning them despite Barbara's pleading in the background. “Told you he's a bad influence,” she calls cheerfully over her shoulder.

Ali turns back to Daniel, face flaming. She glances at the door and raises her chin and says, not quite shamefaced, “Look, he can actually be quite – sweet. Sometimes.”

Daniel finds himself without a response to make to that either. After a hideous pause, he jerks an arm up and mutters some approximation of *ladies first.* The moment the words are out, he realizes the charm doesn't really ring true when you're basically sending them into the lion's den ahead of you. But it's too late to take it back.

He's off his game, a little. For some reason.

Inside the classroom, Johnny and his friends have stacked five desks

on top of each other and appear to be playing King of the Mountain. Dutch is sitting atop the tower and fending off attacks from all sides. With each kick and shove, the tower wobbles wildly: five sets of rickety metal legs creeping ever-closer to critical misalignment.

Daniel and the girls stop just inside the room and stare in awed horror.

“That's *so* dangerous,” says Barbara.

It is; it also looks very fun, though Daniel would never in a million years admit it.

“Give it up, bitch,” shouts Dutch, bracing himself with his wrists behind him and kicking at the chest of Tommy, whose frontal assault is put to a swift end.

Johnny sprints along the tops of the desks along the row behind the tower and with a shout launches himself into the air at Dutch's back. He gets him in a strangle hold and they struggle; the tower sways.

In the split second before it all crashes down, Daniel swears Johnny meets his fascinated gaze and his eyes widen in recognition.

“Oh my god,” says Ali, and she and Barbara rush forward to check for survivors among the debris.

As the girls play nursemaid, Daniel rubs the back of his neck and looks around the untouched half of the room. He chooses the desk closest to the door and takes out his book, the cover now stained from lunch. He gazes up at the clock above the chalkboard. His fingers tap the desk, rub the smooth fringe of the pages of his book.

That was so reckless, what were you thinking? demands Ali from the other side of the room.

Ow, is the only groaned response.

By the time the detention supervisor arrives – Daniel glances up, doesn't recognize her – the desks have been shoved back into a haphazard row.

The teacher either doesn't notice or doesn't care that several of the students appear to be nursing flesh wounds. She tells them all to do their schoolwork and stay quiet, and it's actually not a lot different than study hall, really. Daniel doesn't know what the big deal is about

detention. It's fine.

He reads and listens to the sound of desks creaking and pages rustling around the room. After about ten minutes, he senses – something. An itchiness trickling over his back and shoulders.

He looks around and meets Johnny's eyes from across the room.

The other boy is slumped forward with his chin on his folded arms. His hair is a ruffled mess, the front flying up from his forehead like a very ill-conceived rockabilly pompadour, and he's got a long scratch standing out in a deepening red line along his jaw. He is gazing at Daniel without malice or thought, at least for the first second.

Daniel raises an eyebrow. He watches awareness trickle back in behind those eyes, the way the blush follows barely a beat behind.

Johnny sits bolt upright in his chair like a dog that's seen a squirrel. His mouth flattens and stretches into a sneer, and he drags a finger along his neck. Oh, please.

Daniel turns a little more in his seat and brings a hand up to cup his ear: *what's that? Speak up, can't hear you.*

You're dead, Johnny mouths.

What? asks Daniel again, playing completely clueless.

Johnny thumps a hand down on his desk. *You're dead!!*

Daniel scratches his head and shakes his head, puzzled and apologetic, like gosh darn, he just can't understand him.

“If conversing is that important to you two, I'd be happy to give you another afternoon detention to continue this,” says the teacher from the front of the room.

Daniel turns around immediately and slouches down like he's been caught making lewd gestures in church. His face is hot.

“Sorry,” he says to her.

"Uh huh," she says. "Just make sure it doesn't happen again."

Maybe twenty more minutes go by, and Daniel gets the itchiness at his back again. But he doesn't look around.

Gym

“The thing is, Susan and Barbara have known Tommy forever,” says Ali, hands busy.

Daniel angles his head back and shuts his eyes. “Mm.”

“We were in the same Kindergarten class,” Barbara puts in, “and our moms all hated the woman who ran the neighborhood watch.”

“Classic bonding activity,” says Daniel.

“So when I became friends with them in middle school, Tommy was kind of always there in the background. And he was nice, it was fine.”

“He's still nice,” argues Susan.

Her hands are a little rougher than the others', and Daniel would ask her to be gentle if he didn't suspect she'd go hard in the opposite direction. After all, she thinks Tommy is still *nice.* Daniel is pretty sure he remembers Nice Tommy howling in laughter as he went plummeting down a cliffside to his coulda-been-death. Anyway, he decides to keep quiet.

"And then Tommy made friends with Bobby and Jimmy in seventh grade. And we shared some classes with Johnny, but he was real quiet back then, always sat in the back and never talked to anybody—"

“LaRusso,” says a not-at-all-quiet voice. Daniel opens his eyes and blinks up at Johnny, standing bare-chested against the blue, blue sky with his hands on his hips, which are clad in those too-small shorts they try to hand out to everybody for gym. Daniel has his suspicions about the supply officer of this here ship. Just because it's seventy degrees in November doesn't mean you have to dress like it. Don't people get tired of the unchanging dictates of sun-and-palm-tree fashion?

“Uh,” he says. “Yeah?”

“We're supposed to be playing six on six,” says Johnny. “What are you doing?”

What he's doing should be pretty obvious, Daniel thinks. He's reclining on the grass and letting the girls play with his hair. He isn't sure how he is supposed to explain what is self-evident without making it sound

weird, though, so he settles for saying:

“I'm performing a sit-down.”

“You're lying,” says Johnny flatly.

Daniel frowns. That was quick. “No, honest.”

“No, I mean – you're not exactly sitting, you punk.”

Ah, the other boy must be referring to the fact that he has his head in Ali's lap. Jealousy is such an ugly emotion on people, and on Johnny it is often homicidal. Daniel purses his lips and looks at the sky and considers his response.

“Johnny, just leave off,” says Ali, weary as she slides some of Daniel's hair into a hair band; Daniel really hopes the band isn't pink. His reputation is already toast, but still. There are limits. “You know you just want him to play so you guys can mess with him.”

Johnny shifts his weight, looking fed up. “That's part of the game. If *Daniel*,” and he sneers the name like it's something silly, like Francis and Meredith, “is so scared about being hurt, he can stop worrying. We're not going to do anything.” His eyes flick up and away across the field – a visual fidget? Sign of a lie? Regardless—

“I sure do appreciate you coming over here and offering these reassurances,” Daniel tells him.

Johnny nods stiffly. He keeps standing there, staring expectantly down at Daniel. Daniel keeps himself languid on the grass and stares back. The moment stretches. The girls continue doing something no-doubt awful to his hair.

“So are you going to play or what?” explodes Johnny at last, throwing his hands out from his sides.

“No,” says Daniel, serene. He shuffles his head in the cradle of Ali's sweats and stacks one foot atop the other, ticks them from side to side cheekily. “I told you, this is a sit-down. I am choosing a strategy of noncooperation with a class that has historically been a stage for violence against my person.”

Johnny doesn't look like he understood any of that, except then he says, “You kicked a ball at the back of Bobby's head like a week ago," so maybe he understood the important part.

“*Daniel*,” says Barbara down at him.

“And today,” he says hurriedly, putting up a hand for emphasis. “I am choosing to break that cycle.”

Dutch arrives at Johnny's side in time to hear that and says, “Cycle? Oh, started getting your period, Danielle? About time. So when are you gonna grow some tits?”

The girls all make sounds of deep annoyance and Dutch smirks. Daniel runs his tongue along his molars and bites back a response.

Dutch shuffles in close against Johnny and pats his bare chest. “C'mon, let's just start the game.”

“But the teams are uneven,” says Johnny.

"So what?"

“So – I'm out too. You guys play.” And then, to Daniel's deep consternation and horror, he folds himself down onto the grass a couple feet away.

Dutch stares down in disbelief. “Are you fucking serious, Johnny? The fairy isn't even a threat, look at him. You really think he's dicking Mills?”

“You're disgusting,” snaps Ali.

Daniel keeps his mouth shut because when people are being really awful, sometimes that's the only thing you can do. But he wishes he could apologize to Ali at least.

Johnny shoves at his shins. “Dude, just – go, man. It's fine.”

And Dutch goes, with a shake of his head and some more muttered slander. Daniel stares at the sky and tries to regain his relaxation from before, but it's impossible. It feels wrong and dangerous to lie stretched out and exposed like this with Johnny sitting so close, watching him. When Johnny's around, his animal instincts say curl in close, protect the vitals. Like, his dick is sitting right there.

“Hey, I wasn't done,” says Barbara, as Daniel sits up and shifts to cross his legs.

He scoots over so they're all in a ragged circle and gives Johnny a dark look. “Why do you have ruin everything?”

Johnny gives him a closemouthed smile of delight. “Your hair looks really stupid right now.”

Daniel puts his chin up and does not give him the satisfaction of rushing to drag the hair bands out of his hair, like his hands are desperately itching to do.

“So,” says Johnny, suddenly weirdly at ease, and it's terrible, just the worst. He puts his hands out behind him and rests on his wrists and looks around at them. “What were you guys talking about?”

Daniel says, “They were telling me how you guys didn't used to be such assholes, but then you joined Cobra Kai.”

“We didn't actually *say*—” begins Barbara.

“It was heading in that direction,” says Daniel, not looking away from Johnny, whose smile has evaporated.

“See if we try to tell you anything ever again,” says Susan.

“Can you two please not fight?” asks Ali, eyeing the way Johnny has gone stiff. “A sit-in is supposed to be peaceful.”

“A sit-in,” says Johnny, still glaring at Daniel. “What are you guys even protesting?”

“Gym,” say the girls.

Street

He is on his bike and waiting behind a school bus in the after school traffic jam when the tell-tale growl of a small engine edges up behind him. He doesn't glance around. Proper bicycle safety dictates you should always be aware of your surroundings, but sometimes Daniel would just rather not know, thanks.

The engine falls to a whisper and Johnny slides up beside him, walking the motorcycle with his feet like Fred Flintstone.

Daniel cocks his jaw and looks over. He does his best to look indifferent to the sight of him, or the comical picture they must make from the car behind them.

Johnny makes a show of inspecting his bicycle, eyebrows raised and eyes bright with derision.

“You should think of upgrading your ride,” he says.

“Yeah, I'll get right on that,” says Daniel, like he'd just received a piece of kind advice. He leans over the space between their bikes. “Hey, any interest in swapping?”

Johnny looks ahead. “Nice try.”

“I'm actually happy with my bike,” Daniel confides in him, patting the handlebars like the single-speed was an old draft horse on his dust bowl farm, a member of the family, really. “A friend of mine fixed it up for me after some assholes trashed it.”

Johnny's gloved hands tighten over his own handlebars, and his mouth flattens to an angry slash. “Watch your mouth or you might just find yourself in a repeat experience.”

And, man, for a guy who acts like an asshole most of the time, he sure hates being called an asshole, thinks Daniel. Does the spade wish to be called a heart? What goes on in that weird golden head, exactly? Does he go around shoving people and think they won't notice, or form rational opinions about it?

Daniel wonders what that must be like, to go through the world and think there were never any consequences for one's actions. Or maybe it was something else? You shove the world because when the world

shoves back, it's confirmation you can influence it, have control.

Daniel looks away from the other boy and lifts his fingers from his handlebars, *alright, alright*.... But after a moment he can feel Johnny staring at him.

And maybe it's stupid, what he does next, because there aren't any useful witnesses around (motorists don't count, and neither do the underclassman peering curiously down at them from the back of the school bus). If he knows one thing about Johnny Lawrence, it's that he doesn't have a whole lot of self control over his impulses or temper. And this is why he's such terrible company for Daniel specifically, because Daniel, he can't really help himself sometimes. At the zoo as a kid, he always tried stretching his hand into the cage.

“You know, you could just ask,” he tells him, sidelong earnest. “I mean, I'll probably say no? But you shouldn't let the fear of rejection stop you from ever trying. That's no way to live, man.”

Confusion twists across Johnny's face. “What are you talking about?”

Daniel sways his bike from side to side and looks around the bumper to bumper traffic. “Well, you want to ask me if I want a ride on that thing, right? 'Hop on the back, take a spin around the neighborhood'?”

And he should really, really take the bulging eyes and darkening complexion as a warning to stop, but his own pulse is speeding away from him like *it* jumped on a motorcycle and waved a careless goodbye, *see ya later, Daniel*, so he just keeps going:

“But I don't really ride pillion, and I don't have a helmet anyway, and besides, you're not exactly my type, y'know?”

“*Your*,” says Johnny, strangled and unable to even say it.

Daniel bounces a little over his bike seat, and he hasn't heard from his pulse in ages now, that thing never writes, it never calls. He can feel sweat prickling under his arms, between his suddenly-numb fingers.

“I think it's really brave, what you're doing,” he babbles, and god in heaven, someone stop him. “Not everyone can come terms with themselves in high school and just go for it. It's really admirable.”

“I,” says Johnny hoarsely, “am going to fucking kill you.”

“Hey man, so you have a little crush!” says Daniel, and it's like he's

spent his time waving signs to stop nuclear proliferation and then sent a cruise missile to the guy with a stockpile large enough to obliterate all life on earth. He laughs, a little wildly. “No need to get so serious about it, jeez.”

Johnny drags his kickstand out, sets the motorcycle down and climbs off, and you know what, Daniel is so silly sometimes? What's the point of being on a bicycle if you can't eel around stopped traffic and escape through cars? If society wanted bicyclists to obey traffic laws, they should've built the streets different.

(He has never pedaled harder in his life.)

Sidewalk

“You seem jumpy,” says Ali the next morning. Her tone turns sympathetic. “Worried about Johnny?”

Daniel twists back around from scoping out the parking lot. “No, 'course not. Why would I be?”

They're on the sidewalk out front before first period, and this wouldn't even be an issue if they lived somewhere with proper weather. No way were kids hanging out for fun outside back home at this time of year. Just another way California has it in for him.

“Lisa Halliway said she saw you getting chased down White Oak by Johnny on his bike yesterday afternoon,” says Susan, who is in the process of unwrapping a Blow Pop with the hardbitten, down-home attitude of a trucker digging out a tin of chew. She props her slouchy white leather boot on a parking block. Her eyes on Daniel are amused and expectant.

“Lisa Halliway should maybe watch where she's going instead of me,” says Daniel.

“Uh, she was? She lives right off White Oak.” Tone like *duh*.

“Oh my god,” says Ali, turning in place to look him over. “Are you okay?”

“I'm fine,” he says. And he's a little more terse than he'd normally like to be with any girl he's trying to woo, but so sue him. He's embarrassed.

“Lisa Halliway says you rode your bike right through a grade schooler's birthday party,” continues Susan, and she swivels the sucker in her mouth and widens her eyes malevolently at him.

It's more than he can take. “Well, Lisa should really keep her big nose out of other people's business, shouldn't she.”

“Oh, don't,” says Barbara, glancing around quickly. She lowers her voice. “She's sensitive about that.”

It's not his best moment. But in his defense he'd spent the night before washing frosting out of his hair and frantically thinking about how he was going to afford a replacement cake for little Billy Neill's big one-

oh; his ears were still ringing from Mrs. Neill's shouting and the light boxing he got in the ears, and in the background, the sound of Johnny asphyxiating from peals of laughter. Daniel hadn't slept well.

“I really thought things were getting better with you two,” says Ali, frowning.

“Yesterday the guys seemed very nearly like they were thinking about not killing you before the end of the semester,” agrees Barbara.

“Yeah, I,” and Daniel makes a slight face and run his thumbnail along an eyebrow.

The girls look at him.

He flaps a hand. “I might've – poked the bear, a little.”

Ali's shoulders fall. “Oh, *Daniel*.”

Seriously, how is he supposed to even get to first base with Ali when this is their main source of conversation? *He* wouldn't want to kiss him, if he was Ali. He blows out a breath and braces a hand on his hip and tries to think of a change in conversation.

“What'd you do?” asks Susan.

“What?” he says, distracted.

“I mean, how'd you piss him off?”

Daniel hesitates. “I uh, I implied,” and does this paint him with any sort of brush? It's probably too late for that anyway, huh, “that he, y'know. Had the hots for me and that's why he won't leave me alone.”

“Oh, nice,” says Ali, but she isn't sincere. She is frowning at him, eyes sharp with something.

“Nice,” says Susan at the same time. “I didn't know you had it in you.”

“Oh, you like that?” he asks her, because it's easier than looking at Ali. “Great. Now I know I took a wrong turn.”

“Hey, stick with me kid, I won't steer you wrong.”

“You know, I'm older than you,” he says, because he probably is, he is usually.

Susan shrugs, sucks on the Blow Pop noisily. “What's that got to do with anything?”

“Daniel,” says Barbara in singsong. “Three o'clock. No, no – my three o'clock. Sorry.”

“That's your nine o'clock, Babs,” says Ali tiredly. She leans back unhappily against the bike racks and looks at the ground. “It's literally supposed to be like the face of a clock.”

Daniel looks around and spots the danger immediately.

Johnny and his friends drove their cars this time, and Johnny is leaning back against his flashy red dick extension and staring daggers over in Daniel's direction, which isn't great. He'd been kind of banking on the idea the guy had gotten over it while he was getting his jollies over Daniel's predicament with the ten-year-old's party. No such luck, apparently.

“You know, I didn't know taunting was a part of Pacifism,” says Ali, breaking Daniel from his thoughts.

He looks around from Johnny. “What? Oh – well.” He shifts his weight restlessly, wondering if he should head inside now or wait until it's closer to the bell. “It, it can be. I mean, ask Abbie Hoffman.”

He'd read four chapters of *Revolution for the Hell of It* while sitting around an extremely long family get-together two years ago, and he's pretty sure at least half of the Yippies' whole thing was about taunting.

“I don't know who that is,” says Ali, and he realizes too-late that her tone is strange: flat and displeased, “but I don't think it's very funny, making fun of people about things like that.”

“Things like... what, are you kidding? It's Johnny Lawrence!” And he grins, toothily open-mouthed and inviting her in on the joke. But she doesn't smile back. His smile fades. After a second, he looks down, wrong-footed. “Look, I didn't mean anything by it. Just thought it would piss him off.”

Something strange is happening in his gut, and he's not too thrilled with it, whatever it is. In fact, he's kind of annoyed with it, because what the hell – he's had the charge thrown at him plenty, hasn't he? Since he's arrived in California it's like half the people who look at him assume they know something about him, and the worst of it is,

this whole time he's just been himself, so who's to say whether what they're seeing is real or not.

And it's not like he said anything bad, except for how it's widely acknowledged as the worst thing in the world.

He thinks about Johnny's rage the previous afternoon. He thinks about his panic previously when Daniel had decided to say nothing at all. One was adding fuel to a fire, the other was standing back and letting it burn by itself, if indeed it was going to burn, and it probably was.

“Look, Johnny's stepdad gives him a lot of grief,” says Ali, which should feel like a non-sequitur, except for some reason Daniel says automatically:

“I didn't know.”

Because he hadn't. And great, now he has to feel responsible for hurting the feelings of the worst guy in school. Next time he takes Johnny's fist to his gut, he wonders if he'll remember this conversation and burn over it at all. At the moment, he just feels kind of shitty. It's not really fair.

“Look, I'm sorry,” he says, and he ignores the slight groan Susan gives. “I won't do it again, cross my heart.” And he does cross his heart then. “From now on, this practitioner of nonviolence will stick solely to defense and resistance, alright? Deal?”

He sticks his hand out and stares unblinking into Ali's eyes, and yeah, he's not above putting a little pleading in there. He's an only child, he had years and years of unimpeded practice with this sort of thing.

And he's *good* at it; it takes only a few seconds for her mouth to reluctantly start to smile. Her hand slaps his firmly and they shake on it.

“Deal,” she says, grinning finally. Her eyes slide over his shoulder and she nods her head side-to-side, mouth still held in the shape of that grin. “You should go, though, they're coming over here right now.”

“Cool, see you guys at lunch,” he says quickly, and he is outta there.

History

But of course he can't avoid Johnny forever, or even for very long, because the guy is littered throughout Daniel's school day like pox on a chicken. Daniel has always been conscious of it, but now he's focused on it. It's a lot.

Third period, history. Daniel takes his customary seat by the door, and this choice has consequences because while it means escape is always close at hand, it also means every person entering walks past him.

Or, in the case of Johnny that morning, doesn't walk past him.

Daniel doesn't jump when the large hand slams down on the desk top inches from his face, but only because he was already bracing for something. He sort of sighs to himself and looks up – and up and up, because Johnny has really upped his looming game. Loom any harder and he'll turn into a rug. Wasphair-and-khaki, $800 at Bloomingdale's.

Daniel clears his throat and leans slowly back in his seat. “Hiya, Johnny.”

Johnny stares hard into his eyes and says lowly, “You're one lucky guy, LaRusso.”

“Don't I know it.”

“I didn't tell anyone about your sick little fantasies.”

Right. “That's... very generous of you.” He promised Ali, he reminds himself. Johnny leans over him, and Daniel slides down in his seat to put a few more inches between their faces, and he repeats it like a holy mantra: he promised Ali.

“So if you know what's good for you, you won't go repeating them to anyone else.”

That didn't even make sense, he wants to protest. Why would he repeat his sick little fantasies to the people he is supposed to feel lucky about being spared from? This guy can't maintain continuity with his own threats! The fact that he can't keep it all straight is the second least straight thing about him.

Daniel grinds the words backwards down his throat and makes what he is willing to admit is a *very* strange sound. He grimaces with

difficulty up at the other boy.

Johnny holds the stance for another couple seconds, narrowing his eyes and studying Daniel's face as if he might spot the urge to start telling the rapidly-filling classroom about his sick little fantasies. Then he sort of snarl-feints at him and shoves the desk hard enough to send it (and Daniel) screeching several inches back into the desk behind him. Jeez.

He passes on, like a very blond hurricane. Daniel surreptitiously lets out a long breath. He thinks that went really well, all things considered.

The implications of the exchange only hit him after the danger has lifted, and he drops his pencil; it rolls over the edge of his desk before he can grab it, and then he has to slide out of his seat and bend forward to pick it up, and all the while he's going: oh, shit, I was right?

Sure Johnny stares a lot, and sure he blushes a lot and oh god, he totally has a crush on Daniel? That's so weird.

Daniel can't think about this right now. Daniel can't think about this with anyone else around. He needs to find one of those bunkers the rich and famous built back in the fifties in case an atom bomb was dropped on the poor and undeserving, and then maybe, deep underground and surrounded by twenty feet of cement and steel – maybe *then*, Daniel can allow himself to think about what all this means.

The teacher arrives and the class starts, and Daniel glances around before he can stop himself. Johnny is sitting at the back of the class and, would you look at that, he's watching him again. He looks less clueless about it this time. More like he's thinking, which can't end well for anyone involved.

It's not really fair, reflects Daniel as he turns back around after the standard threatening gesture has been formulated and delivered. What, he's supposed to fight his own mouth *and* Johnny Lawrence's complete lack of subtlety? If Johnny forgets himself and gets caught staring by someone else, is he going to take it out on Daniel's ass? Depressingly, he knows the answer to that one. When the American military fucks up, it's never America that faces the consequences.

He has no interest in being murdered by a closeted karate psycho. He had big plans for his future, and they all involve living into his

thirties, at least.

If only there was a way to maintain his incredible attractiveness when Ali was around, and somehow switch it off the moment Johnny walked onto the scene. Daniel considers the feasibility of this plan, and sucks absently on the end of his pencil.

Fountain

So he's minding his own business – a critical mistake, he can't really recommend it as a way to live one's life – and helping himself to a little light refreshment via a water fountain in the hallway on the way to Barbara's locker when Johnny makes his next move in this asymmetric war he's waging against Daniel.

A hand interposes itself between Daniel's mouth and the spigot of the fountain, cutting the stream of water off, and Daniel flinches back. He doesn't really have a chance to do anything other than assess the situation (Johnny, alone: not good) before the other boy is shoving a piece of paper at his chest and crowding him backwards. Daniel doesn't even mean to back up, but he's been taken off guard.

“Wanted to make sure you got it,” says Johnny, nodding down to the page. It's an application.

“What's this for?” asks Daniel as he absently wipes his mouth.

“You gotta get your Mommy to sign that,” says Johnny, and he's really in top form: he's circling, he's sneering, he's living his best, saddest life. “So you can be in the tournament with the big boys.”

And it's just as well Daniel's still off his game, because otherwise he probably would've said something in response that a court of law would've deemed provoking. Sorry for your loss, Mrs. LaRusso, but the boy really had it coming with that one.

“They gotta know where to send your body when I get finished with it,” says Johnny, and he momentarily forgets himself enough to almost-sorta smile, like Daniel's just another one of his karate buddies he's trash talking.

Daniel looks up at him. “Wait, I thought this was supposed to be no contact?” He's pretty sure Mr. Miyagi hadn't intended to sign him up for a beating.

Johnny expression turns stony at the sound of his voice. He leans in close and says deliberately, “Accidents happen.”

And he gives him a significant look, just in case Daniel didn't understand – *you see, I'm going to kill you in that ring; I'm going to take you apart and use your ribcage as a frottoir in the post-tournament ritual*

dedication to my pagan karate god; I'm going to scatter your ashes along the 405 and put an end forever to the LaRusso line; me and the guys will probably go get pizza afterwards.

And like, why.

Daniel is still puzzling it all out as Johnny steps back and turns away, smugly convinced he has threatened his way to the promised land of straightness.

And like, seriously. Why. That's all Daniel really wants to know. He can't possibly be this much of a threat to Johnny's masculinity or whatever. He's not trying to be modest here, he knows he has a nice smile, but it's not like he ever aims it in Johnny's direction. So why?

“Hey,” he calls after him, “let me ask you a question.”

And he should probably take the hint when Johnny wheels around, looking disproportionately put-upon. It's like the mere sound of Daniel's voice is enough to drive him crazy.

“What pleasure do you get from all this?” he asks.

“All *what*?” says Johnny, annoyed, as if he hadn't just stalked Daniel through the halls of the school in order to giddily present him with the application and associated compliments.

“Your big shot attitude,” he says, and he looks at him, trying to seem open and direct. If he knows about Johnny, and Johnny knows he knows about him, then surely they can talk plainly to one another. That's his working theory, anyway. “I mean, we both know you can kick my face in, so why do you still bother?”

Johnny approaches him again slowly, and Daniel remains in place, watchful and still. Until the last second, he still thinks this all might end in a surprising show of measured communication and reconciliation. Then Johnny fists his hands in the front of his flannel, and nope, he's pretty pissed.

He shakes Daniel and says, “Maybe because I like to, you ever think of that?”

And he'd be more believable if he didn't sound so frantic, if the anger in his voice wasn't so clearly bolstered by panic. Daniel reads all of this in a second, and it's so needless and exasperating, he doesn't think strategically before replying:

“Well, you ever think your teacher might be wrong?”

Because what's the point in learning karate if you're still exploding all over the place? If you see a threat down every hall, if you're so uncomfortable in your own skin? Johnny might be able to beat Daniel up, but he has no peace with himself, and it's honestly kind of pathetic, and oh look, now Johnny is hauling him across the hall and shoving him up against a wall. Okay.

Daniel puts his head back and watches Johnny. There are two people within him; one is fascinated by every little tell of emotion: the labored breath, the slight tremor in the finger Johnny has shoved in Daniel's face. This person thinks it would *hi*-larious to maybe make a kissy face right now, and it takes all of Daniel's willpower to ignore the impulse, because he has a plan of nonviolent noncooperation to enact here.

The other person is going, oh man, you're dead meat.

Johnny's body is a long uncompromising wall between Daniel and the rest of the world. Daniel has no choice about what's going to happen next. He can only choose how he reacts to it. Johnny says something, and it doesn't really matter what. Daniel keeps meeting his eyes, determined not to betray an ounce of fear or anything else. He wants to give the other boy nothing to work with; he wills himself into a smooth, reflective surface.

Any maybe this works? Johnny doesn't hit him – he shoves him once more against the wall and steps back, looking tight and furious. Daniel follows him with his eyes, still saying nothing.

Johnny makes it maybe ten feet before he launches himself at the wall and kicks one of the top lockers closed. His chest heaves as he looks back at Daniel, who still says nothing, does nothing. Johnny whirls around and stalks off.

Daniel lets himself drop down from his tip-toes at last. All in all: a successful run at his new plan. He ignores the fact that his heart is pounding, and he feels vaguely sick and shaky.

He looks down at the application and wonders if he can forge his mother's signature.

Sleepover!

Daniel stops at the edge of the walkway and looks up at the house. “I don't know if this is a good idea. Are you sure your parents are okay with me being here?”

Susan looks up from digging through her bookbag and gives him this look like he's the slowest worm wriggling on the worm pile. “I'm not *telling* them about you, we're sneaking you in.”

“What,” he says, and a windbreaker lands on his head. Behind him, Ali and Barbara giggle.

“Put that on,” instructs Susan briskly. “And put the hood up. And try to walk less weird.”

“I don't walk weird,” he says, hands automatically moving to obey. The windbreaker is pink and purple with diagonal slashes of green, and he doesn't think it does much for his skin tone. But whatever: he can pull this off. It's all about attitude.

He shrugs the windbreaker on and zips it up. Flips the hood over his head and turns to give Ali his best rakish smile. She sparkles. He bounces his eyebrows. She laughs. He is killing this.

“Okay,” says Susan as they walk up to the door, “so just keep your head down, stay behind the others, and try to get up the stairs as quickly as possible. But not too quickly. Act normal. But don't let them see your face.”

Daniel tucks his chin beneath the collar of the jacket and casts his eyes down demurely. “I'm the new girl in school and terribly shy.”

“*No* talking,” says Susan sternly, and they're inside.

It's not exactly high stakes. Daniel is almost disappointed at how easy it is to infiltrate an all-girls sleepover; Susan's father doesn't even look up from his magazine in the sitting room off the entry way, and her mother only calls out from another room further down the hall. Daniel makes it halfway up the stairs before he pauses, considering. He looks back at Ali, who shakes her head up at him: a wordless *what is it?*

He looks over the banister to Susan's father. He looks back at Ali. His eyebrows rise and in a rustle of windbreaker he spreads his arms wide

and gives a little shimmy.

Her eyes go wide and scandalized, crashing over to check on the oblivious breadwinner in the other room. Over her shoulder, Barbara stares up at him in horrified disbelief.

Daniel hops jauntily backwards up a step and performs a kick and a wriggle, giving his best impression of Marilyn-doing-Diamonds.

Stop it! mouth both girls frantically.

Daniel twirls and tap dances down three steps until he's beside Ali; he wraps a hand around her waist and puts his other hand on his heart, and her face goes scarlet.

In the other room, Susan's father clears his throat and uncrosses his legs. He tosses his magazine aside.

Susan appears at the foot of the stairs, eyes promising murder, and she rushes up at them with her arms outstretched like a cowboy trying to corral uncooperative livestock. She shoves them along and it's a stampede, it's a riot; Daniel loses his footing three-quarters of the way up and knocks both knees on the risers; fatally, he groans a little.

“Susan?” calls her father from below.

Susan pulls and pushes roughly at Daniel until he drags himself up the final steps out of view.

“Yes?” she says, pitching her voice so sweetly, she is like a completely different person.

“I can't handle this kind of tension, I'm sorry, I'm sorry,” whispers Barbara, stepping over Daniel's prone form and disappearing into the open bedroom to the right at the top of the stairs. Ali follows swiftly, shaking her head as Daniel dramatically puts out a grasping hand: don't leave me. He lets his head thump back down to the carpet in defeat.

“Your mother and I are going out for dinner in a couple hours,” says Susan's father, meanwhile. “Are you girls going to be alright?”

“Oh, we'll be fine,” says Susan, and she delivers a kick to Daniel's behind. “We're just going to do some studying, probably have an early night.”

Daniel gives her a filthy look and start army-crawling towards the open door of the bedroom Ali and Barbara disappeared into. He makes it to the center of a rope rug, raises his head to get a general impression of glossy fashion spreads all over the walls, and then sprawls face-down. His cheeks are burning. He might've overdone it, a little, he thinks.

Susan walks into the room and shuts the door with finality.

Daniel rolls onto his back and looks up at the girls with studied innocence. “I think that went pretty well.”

“And *I* think Johnny was right about you,” says Susan. “You're really asking for it, you know that?”

“What are you talking about?” he says, and he spreads his hands. “There were stairs, I mean – the opportunity was right there. How do you not?”

“So what are we studying first?” asks Ali, still a little pink-cheeked. She avoids Daniel's eye and digs through her backpack, pulling out a textbook, of all things.

Susan folds her arms. “We are not studying, are you kidding me?”

Daniel shifts onto his side and props his head up on a bent elbow. “I'm with our host on this one.”

Ali looks between them all, and when it becomes apparent even Barbara is not on her side, her shoulders fall a little. “Well, fine – what do you guys want to do?”

Sleepover!!

“And we're skipping Daniel this round,” says Susan, after Ali has completed applying her peanut butter face mask.

Daniel comes up from his elbows in affront. “Hey! What? Why?”

“Because you'll just choose Truth again, and whatever we ask you, you'll find some way to turn it into a fifteen-minute lecture. Abuse the system and you get disqualified.”

“I didn't know that was the rule,” he protests. “I didn't want to pick Dare because who knows *what* you'd ask me to do. I didn't want to end up trying on your underwear or something crazy.”

“So what you're saying is, you don't trust us,” murmurs Barbara, casting a sidelong arch look to Susan, who nods and pops her gum.

“Also, why would I want you in my underwear,” said Susan. “Like, why on earth would anyone want that.”

Daniel waves an arm. “Because you'd think it's funny or something, I don't know how your brain works. You have a cruel sense of a humor.”

Susan leans forward on all fours across the no man's land of their floor circle, eyes narrow. “Oh yeah? If that's what you really think, then why'd you come over?”

He came over because he is very obviously trying to get with Ali, like how is this not clear to everyone. He doesn't say this. “My ma always taught me, never turn away from a hand extended in friendship,” he says primly.

Susan huffs and settles back. “What a load of—”

A loud tapping sound comes from the window. The girls twist around; Daniel leans far to the right to look around their bodies, and then his soul tries to sink through the floor in dismay.

Tommy taps the glass again and waves and points down at the sill.

“What is he doing here?” asks Daniel warily. Is he alone, he wants to add, but he doesn't bother because wolves rarely run alone.

Susan is already crawling over to the window and unlatching it. “I told him to swing by.”

“*Susan*,” begins Ali, exasperated.

“Oh, don't give me that tone, Ali,” says Susan as she pushes the window up. “So you and Johnny used to date, big deal. Can't we all get past that?”

Tommy catches the conversation and says brightly, “Oh, I don't think Johnny's past it.”

Daniel watches Ali's shoulders stiffen. Beneath the peanut butter mask, she looks unhappy.

“Is he with you?” asks Susan.

“Who do you think he's standing on?” shouts the boy in question from somewhere below.

Barbara climbs to her knees and pokes her head out the window. She looks down and says, “You know you could've just used the front door? Her parents aren't home.”

“Maybe I should I run and lock the door,” Daniel says to Ali, hoping to garner a smile. Her mouth curls slightly: more acknowledgement than amusement.

“Is that LaRusso?” says Johnny from outside, tone almost unrecognizable out of its usual context, because he is addressing his friend.

Daniel props his chin on his fist and sighs.

“Do you got LaRusso in there?” shouts Johnny. There it is, that's the usual guy.

“They do,” Tommy reports down to his mighty leader. “And he's looking very cozy with the girls.”

“Oh, why do you have to spin him up like that?” Barbara asks him, reproachful.

Tommy shrugs and taps the window sill. “I can't help it, it's *funny* – whoa, Johnny, watch what you're doing, man. Johnny, shit—”

Tommy's head disappears from the window, and there is a muffled

crash below. The girls make an assortment of sounds – Barbara's soprano gasp harmonizing with Susan's alto *ooh*, all of it bolstered by Ali's put-upon tenor groan. They cluster around the window to inspect the aftermath.

“Oh no,” says Daniel, deadpan and unenthusiastic from across the room. His finger plucks at the coil of the rope rug. “Are they okay.”

“See, we have to let them in,” Barbara says to Ali. “Look at the trouble they'll get into otherwise.”

“Completely brainless,” agrees Susan, eyes sharp with fascination.

Daniel is starting to suspect he will not get a vote in this situation.

Sleepover!!!

Daniel cocks his jaw and determinedly lets his eyes wander the room in casual study: over to the desk and the small collage of John McEnroe photos on the wall (that explains *so* much, he thinks), up along the stucco ceiling, across the bed with primrose floral pattern, hello Ali, Barbara, Tommy, Dutch—

Johnny is still glowering at him.

Daniel sucks on an eye tooth and considers the situation. He could continue trying to ignore the freak fuming four feet from his person, but based on past experience this is unlikely to put an end to the troubling behavior. He could address him directly and challenge the staring, but this might read as provocation, and Ali already seems less than pleased. There really isn't a good option. Johnny Lawrence is the arsenic in Daniel's elderberry wine, just a little bit of him ruining a good time.

“We're not playing Truth or Dare,” Dutch is saying. “What are we, fourteen? Look girls, I stole a little bottle of something from my dad's liquor cabinet—”

Daniel rolls his eyes up from the floor and meets Johnny's gaze. He widens his eyes, hoping to startle the other boy into giving up; Johnny only narrows his own and continues his mulish staring.

“We're not drinking,” says Ali, a little stiffly.

She still has a swipe of peanut butter at the corner of her jaw from where she'd hastily ran to the bathroom to clean her face before the other three boys came up. And Daniel should be thinking that over, weighing whether he is pleased she is comfortable enough around him to wear peanut butter on her face versus worrying she is perhaps *too* comfortable around him, like maybe she doesn't see him as someone she cares about looking good for? – and he totally would be thinking about all that, except Johnny is kind of a lot to deal with right now.

“Who said anything about drinking? Let's play Spin the Bottle.”

Tommy makes a slightly doubtful noise. “Dude, do you see the odds in this room? Boys outnumber the girls.”

“So?”

“So what're you gonna do when that bottle lands on LaRusso, pucker up?”

Daniel can't not look at Johnny then, and sure enough his face has gone pink. Daniel is so dead.

“Hey, can you leave me out of this?” he asks loudly.

“You being stupid on purpose?” says Dutch to Tommy, ignoring Daniel. “Bottle lands on a boy, you don't kiss him, you punch him. Duh.”

“I don't think I want to play,” announces Ali, and like, if she's not even going to be one of the options—

“Ali, don't be such a stick in the mud,” says Susan. “You owe me, remember?” Said with an accompanying look, and Daniel has no idea what that's all about, but whatever it is, it makes Ali reluctantly stop scooting back from the circle. Her eyes flick up and between Johnny and Daniel, and she looks resigned.

“I'm not sure I'm in the mood to get punched,” begins Daniel, not ready to give up yet, but Johnny cuts him off, leaning forward over his crossed legs and demanding in the most obnoxious tone Daniel's ever heard in his whole life:

“You scared?”

Daniel smooths his expression over. He puts his chin up and watches him, and Johnny raises his eyebrows like he's waiting for an actual answer.

There isn't a single person in the room who doesn't know or can't guess at how scared Daniel is; has been; will be. Everyone's seen the fights and their aftermath, and Daniel doesn't exactly have the kind of face that looks tougher or more manly with a bruise. So yeah, of course Daniel is scared. For a moment he hates everyone for seeing it.

“We won't let them hurt you,” reassures Barbara. “They won't be real punches.”

Dutch cracks his knuckles and winks at him.

“Great,” says Daniel, giving up. “Yeah, what fun – look, about that bottle....”

It's something called sweet vermouth and it is perfectly disgusting. Daniel vaguely hopes Ali's spin doesn't land on him, because he doesn't want their first kiss to taste like this stuff. Also he's kind of been hoping their first kiss will be more romantic and have a little less Johnny Lawrence & Company for an audience.

Susan volunteers to go first, sadistically proactive. The bottle doesn't spin a whole lot; ballasted with the vermouth, it performs a rotation and a half and lands conveniently on Tommy. Daniel wonders if it's possible for a person to be good at Spin the Bottle. This whole thing seems pretty suspicious.

Susan smirks and climbs up onto all fours and advances with intent upon Tommy, who beams at her for the length of the journey. At the last second she darts forward and kisses his cheek before he can try turning into it, which he does almost immediately. Tommy rolls his eyes gamely.

“Too slow,” she says, sotto voce, and sinks back on her haunches smugly. She looks around and decides, “Clockwise – Johnny, you're up.”

Daniel's stomach twists immediately. Please, he thinks. Please, please, oh please, please, please—

The bottle doesn't even make a full rotation before landing squarely on Daniel. Johnny had barely twisted it at all. He practically flicked it with his fingertips.

“You know,” starts Daniel, tensing.

“Do you need someone to make you hold still for it?” asks Johnny in fake sympathy. He is alight with glee. He is actually rolling the sleeves of his sweater up: Daniel's very own Bluto. He looks twice as big as he did five seconds ago.

“Okay, guys, come on,” says Ali, looking around, “I didn't think you were serious about the punching.”

“Why would you think we *weren't*?” asks Dutch, incredulous.

“I feel like I should get a say in this,” says Daniel.

He sneers. “What, would you actually rather Johnny plant one on you?”

Johnny's smirk flips upside down in an instant and he scowls at his friend. “Don't even joke about that.”

And you know what? Fuck this. Daniel has his limits.

He blows him a kiss and says, “Hey, make love not war, man," before bolting backwards from the room.

Yells burst out from around the circle as Johnny growls and lunges after him.

Danger!

Daniel's socked feet slide on the flooring outside Susan's room, because rich people are weirdos who don't appreciate the simpler pleasures in life like not slipping or not having freezing toes in the middle of winter; and yeah, he gets it, he's in Southern California now and nobody's got cold toes here but maybe that's actually the problem, maybe cold feet builds character. If Johnny Lawrence ever had cold feet maybe he wouldn't be hunting Daniel down right now. Who cares about maybe being gay when you lack slippers?

Daniel smacks into the wall at the top of the stairs and twists; pounds unsteadily down the top three steps; panics and jumps down the next four, which is too many because his foot catches on the edge of the fifth and he tumbles forward and lands headfirst into the wall at the bottom. A sickly pain judders from the back of his skull down his neck.

He scrambles up, ignoring the various screaming parts of his body because he can hear the screaming from upstairs, and *there's no time*. He rushes through the front hall, thinking: a room with a lock? The back door? It's a nightmare game of hide in seek, and he can't really think clearly.

Johnny appears at the top of the stairs and he doesn't have any trouble with them because he plants a hand on the banister and vaults clean over it, landing right behind Daniel.

“Are you kidding me?” says Daniel, despairing.

He backs up and Johnny advances. There are no lights on down here and it's hard to make out his expression. Daniel wishes he'd talk and threaten him at least; somehow, it would be less terrifying if Johnny was talking. He's sure of it.

“Look, I'm sorry, okay. You don't have to do this,” he says rapidly, shuffling backwards. They cross through to the kitchen. A pale light from the patio out back stripes Johnny's face and glimpsing his expression is a lot worse, so much worse. “I didn't ask to play that stupid game, I didn't want any of this.”

He'll wonder later why he even bothered; why he thought what he wanted would have any bearing on the situation.

“I'm going to break your jaw,” says Johnny, speaking at last and it turns out that's not actually better, because he sounds like he really, really means it. He winds his arm back and strikes and Daniel—

Daniel blocks it.

Neither of them understands what has happened at first. The shocked thoughts go: maybe Johnny missed, or maybe he didn't even try in the first place – maybe they were wrong, imagined the punch? Except then he tries again with his other arm and Daniel blocks that too.

Daniel stops backing up. His own breathing is harsh to his ears. His heart has stolen all spare resources from his brain. In front of him, Johnny stops too; his chest is rising and falling like a racehorse's and his eyes are very wide, the whites showing around the dark pits of his pupils.

Fear drains away like someone's pulled the stopper from the bottom of the room. For the first time, Daniel looks at Johnny Lawrence's body and doesn't see an eventuality, a threat. He blinks and breathes and sees a boy: just a fucking boy who doesn't get to touch Daniel without his permission.

The air goes, or maybe gravity does; when they move, it feels slow and heavy like they're underwater. Daniel steps – not back, but to his left: not away, but over. Circling. He's the one circling now. And Johnny only turns in place to keep facing him. His face has gone wary and still.

His fists aren't fists anymore. Held loose at his sides, they look a lot like hands.

Daniel leans carefully against the refrigerator, molding his spine to the surface. In the dark it feels like something allowed, the way he finds himself putting his head back and looking Johnny over. It's nothing he hasn't done before: in the library and hallway, all those times he thought he was waiting for the hit and thought it would be better if he at least faced it, watched it come like a storm sweeping up from the southeast over the Atlantic. Dark and inevitable, something to be endured.

Endure this, he thinks at Johnny, and he reaches out.

Danger!!

Johnny's sweater is impossibly soft. Cashmere, or something like that. When Daniel pulls at it, it doesn't have a chance to stretch because Johnny comes along instantly: floating forward like his feet aren't even touching the floor.

Johnny steps into Daniel and his head tilts down like he's thought about it a million times, plotted out the precise angle needed. He looks at Daniel's mouth, and his breathing bizarrely starts to settle. Running on silent: the only sign of it the occasional flare of his nostrils.

Daniel wets his bottom lip and watches closely as the ripple effect of this simple act travels over Johnny. The flicker at his throat, the hitch of his chest. Daniel feels almost drunk; maybe sweet vermouth is really strong? Johnny's breath is on his face, hot and damp. If he turns his head at all, their noses will brush. They are frozen in place, hovering on the edge of something. All they need is – one – reckless – push—

“What are you waiting for,” whispers Daniel, because somehow he knows like he knows anything that Johnny *is* waiting. They are pressed so close, he can feel how the other boy's body tightens at the mere sound of his voice. Daniel studies his face, the flinch of his mouth and trembling of his eyelashes. He waits for Johnny to look up and meet his eyes and then he says, not at all gentle:

“Scared?”

His head knocks into the fridge as Johnny takes his mouth in a savage kiss.

Johnny's lax hands spring back into action, coming up to frame his face and neck. His palms fit neatly over Daniel's jaw with perfect bruising force, turning his head where it needs to go, and it goes, he does. Somehow he even melts into it.

It's nothing like what Daniel expected kissing to be. He's not thinking *does he like me?* because he knows he does not. In fact, he's not thinking at all. It's all *yes* and *now*, but if he pauses for even a second to verbalize those wants, he knows they'll both stop.

Daniel lets go of Johnny's sweater and hooks an elbow around his

neck, straining up onto his tip-toes: aiming for something he can't begin to guess at or comprehend, but maybe Johnny knows, because he tears his mouth away.

His mouth is a grim, determined line as he grips Daniel's hips and lifts, knocking them back against the fridge in his rush: scattering magnets and shuffling over until he arranges Daniel up on the counter. Daniel's head is knocked back again, this time against the cupboards, but he doesn't care because somewhere in the push-pull of it all, he got his tongue in Johnny's mouth.

Johnny makes a desperate low sound and shoves up the back of Daniel's shirt, blunt nails and strong fingers scraping over his skin. He palms his waist, squeezing and pulling him closer, somehow even closer. Still not close enough.

Daniel breaks his mouth free to gulp in air and Johnny just transfers his mouth down, nipping and sucking at his jaw, his neck. His hand drags down the length of Daniel's spine, fumbles around to press hard and uncompromising over his lap. They both realize Daniel's hard at the same time and groan. Johnny ducks his head to pant and stare down at it; his flyaway fine hair tickles the underside of Daniel's chin.

Over his pale head, Daniel meets the eyes of Ali, standing frozen across the room.

Danger!!!

Daniel read *The Invisible Man* by H.G. Wells back in sophomore year and ever since, he's thought about how he'd make much better choices than Griffin approximately once a week. This is one such occasion.

If Daniel was invisible right now, not only would Ali not have seen him and Johnny play escalatio right into each other's tonsils, but Johnny wouldn't have come after him in the first place. None of this would have happened; the world would be at peace.

Johnny's first response to the inhuman croak of horror that crawls up out of Daniel's throat is to huff a slight laugh and try to bury his face in Daniel's lap. Ali's eyes go impossibly wide – well, wider – and Daniel shoves and kicks the other boy away from him in a panic.

“Fuck's your problem?” demands Johnny, and then he notices the direction of Daniel's gaze and whirls around to stare white-faced at Ali, who takes a step back. And then another.

“Ali,” says Johnny, starting forward. “Wait.”

But Ali does not wait. Ali bolts.

Johnny chases.

Daniel remains shocked still on top of the counter for another second, staring open-mouthed as Johnny sprints back into the front hall in three swift lunges. His brain jump-starts back into action when the other boy grabs Ali from behind, swinging her clean off her feet.

Daniel scrambles down. His feet slip-slide again but he crosses back out of the kitchen faster than he's ever moved in his life. He reaches them and pulls at Johnny's shoulder, but the other boy impatiently shakes him off like he's a pesky fly. He's got one hand clamped over a furious Ali's mouth, and he's twisting in place to contain her; she's doing a lot of kicking. Daniel has just to jump back to avoid yet more damage to his head.

“What're you doing,” he hisses. “Put her down! Ali, I'm *so* sorry, god – it's, it's not what it looked like, honest.”

“Shut up,” cries Johnny, wild with hysteria, “just shut up, let me think.”

And this doesn't sound like a very good plan to Daniel; Johnny thinking will only lead to one place: the cemetery. Murder-murder-suicide, Daniel can see it all over his face already.

And Ali must agree because she frees her mouth enough to bite down hard on his palm. Johnny bends forward with his burden, grinding his pained squawk down with such force of will, it's shocking he doesn't break a tooth.

“Just put her down, you imbecile,” snaps Daniel, and he pulls at his arms again, trying to free her. He catches a foot to the gut and springs back. “Hey, Ali, I'm trying to *help* here—”

“What the hell are you guys doing down there,” shouts Susan from the top of the stairs, still out of sight, and then the front door creaks and jangles with the tell-tale sound of a key being inserted.

The three of them freeze.

Murder-murder-murder-murder-suicide? thinks Daniel faintly.

Johnny turns and runs back to the kitchen with Ali in his arms, and Daniel has no choice but to run after them. They nearly crash into the patio door; try it but in their haste forget how to operate the lock. They hear the front door swing open behind them at the other end of the house, and Daniel drags Johnny to the left out of view. They fetch up against a door, and he reaches behind him: gets a hand on the knob and twists and they are inside some kind of dark space.

Daniel gets the door shut and not even a second later, a line of light appears along the floor as the overhead lights in the kitchen turn on.

“I don't know, I think the quality has really gone down at that place,” says Susan's father. “We should just give up before one of us gets food poisoning.”

“You're exaggerating,” says Susan's mother. “Just stop ordering the fish. My chicken was just fine.”

“I don't think we should be paying eighty dollars for a meal that's *just fine*, Mary.”

Daniel lets out his breath. He turns and squints, but can't really see the other two. “Ali?” he says, voice more breath than whisper. “You okay?”

The pause that follows has him worrying that Johnny has taken the opportunity to smother her dead, and he wonders if he should start groping around for a heavy object to use as a bludgeon. He thinks they're in the pantry; there's gotta a bag of flour or a rolling pin or something.

But then something deeper in the pantry shifts and Ali's voice floats forwards from the darkness, perfectly even:

“Yes, Daniel. I'm doing just great.”

And he's no dummy, he can read a tone, but there's not much he can do about it at the moment. So he says, a little lamely, “Oh. Good.”

They stand unmoving for the next several minutes, listening to Susan's parents descend into a bitter argument about the dinner. The father thinks the sommelier was on drugs. The mother thinks the father didn't tip well enough and embarrassed them both and now they can *never show their faces there again*. The father says he doesn't want to go anyplace that employs dope fiends anyway.

Now that his adrenaline is fading, Daniel can feel a headache coming on. He licks his lips, and his mouth is tender. This makes him think about the encounter that took place ten feet from where they're standing right now, and that's not something he wants to think about: not here, not now. If he's being honest with himself, maybe not ever.

He tries to think of something to say to Ali. He wasn't himself? It was the sweet vermouth? It was Johnny's fault.

Except Daniel knows that isn't true. He thinks about the way Johnny went completely still and attentive after he blocked his punches, how he'd only approached Daniel because Daniel pulled him forward. Something in Daniel knew – knows? – that the other boy might've done anything he told him to in that moment. So whose fault is it, really.

He needs to widen his research, he thinks. Back to the card catalog. Is *burden of responsibility* a covered subject matter? What's he got to work with here – Machiavelli? Does he need to read Machiavelli? He doesn't really want to read Machiavelli. Hobbes?

“Ali,” Johnny is whispering, meanwhile. “Please.”

“I really, *really* do not want to talk about this right now.”

“I know, I'm sorry,” he says, miserable. His voice is practically shaking; Daniel is deeply disconcerted to realize the other boy's voice is weirdly choked, like it's thick with tears. “But p-please, I just – you gotta—”

“Just leave it, Johnny,” she says with tired finality.

“Well, I am so sorry you had such a terrible time tonight, Kenneth!” says angry Mary in the kitchen. “Perhaps next time we should invite your secretary.”

“Oh, god in heaven, again with the insecurity. I told you nothing was going on there.”

Daniel puts his arms out carefully to feel for obstacles and slowly bends to sit on the floor. He thinks it might be a while before they can sneak free.

Pantry

Daniel tosses an onion between his hands and tries again. Third time's the charm? It has to be, because it's either that or a strike-out. Either way, he'll be on more solid footing afterwards.

“It's just, I feel like if we're going to be stuck in here, we might as well talk about it,” he says, and he tries to ignore the twin sounds of discontent that issue from deeper in the pantry. “We're gonna have it out eventually anyway, and I think it will be easier if we do it now, before any... misunderstandings get cemented in the mental record, if you know what I mean.”

“And what misunderstandings would those be, Daniel?” asks Ali.

Her tone tells him she knows exactly which misunderstandings he is referring to, but she wants to be difficult and either make him articulate a version of events (mortifying) or, more likely, she's hoping he'll be shamed into silence (unlikely). Unfortunately for her, Daniel is perfectly capable of sailing between that particular Scylla and Charybdis; or, if not sailing, at least performing a very cunning doggy paddle.

“The misunderstanding,” he says carefully, “where you forgot that we were playing a game of Spin the Bottle upstairs? I never signed off on Dutch's revised rules of the game, and you see, as a practitioner of nonviolence—”

“You have got to be kidding me,” she says flatly.

“Holy shit,” says Johnny, despairing. “How do people think you're *smart*? How?”

“Hey, I'm just explaining what happened on my end!”

“Shut up before you make things any worse, LaRusso.”

“Make me,” snaps Daniel, and he is thankful for the darkness because his face colors immediately. “That is, I mean. Not like—”

“Susan told me,” says Ali, like she's talking to herself. “She told me, and I said, 'you don't know what you're talking about', and now here I am. Sitting on a bag of potatoes in the dark with – ” and she doesn't commit to finishing the full thought, “with you two.”

“Okay, one, Susan *doesn't* know what she's talking about,” and Daniel doesn't know what Susan was talking about either, but he sure can guess. “I don't think guys should be judged by the barometer of a girl who's been best buds with one of the biggest macho assholes in the school since the days of Duck Duck Goose. Okay?”

“*Hey*,” says Ali. “Look, you're new here, you don't actually know anyone. And I know they've been huge jerks lately, but there's more —”

“Oh, please. You think I don't know the type? Do you have any idea what guys are like back in my old neighborhood? The world's a lot bigger than this stupid valley, and I've seen enough of it to clock a small mind when I see it. And, anyway, why are you trying to defend them?”

“I don't know,” she says, furiously calm, “why were you kissing one of them?”

“Leave me out of this,” says Johnny fervently.

“I told you, that was all a big misunderstanding. I'm not like that. And anyway, even if I was, I sure as hell wouldn't choose King Karate over here.” And maybe it's the topic, or maybe it's the darkness that means he can't seen anyone's expression and they can't see him, but for whatever reason *he doesn't stop there.* “I mean, if I was going to explore that lifestyle? There are way better pickings out there than the biggest bully at the school. Like maybe I could go proposition a member of the Hell's Angels. Maybe I'll go take a walk through Skid Row, ask if anybody wants to plant one on me, I mean, since apparently that's what you think I'm into—”

He is blinded by the pantry door swinging wide; they all put up a hand to block their eyes from the sudden spill of light while a wide-eyed brunette woman stares down at them in mounting horror and anger.

“You must be Mary,” says Daniel, and he smiles.

Exile

“Ali, what on earth are you doing alone in a closet with two boys?” demands Mary as she pulls her stumbling out into the kitchen. She looks a bit like she wants to shut the door on him and Johnny, so Daniel squeezes past her, keeping his friendly smile firmly in place. It makes no difference.

“This is completely inappropriate behavior for a young woman,” she continues. “Your mother will be so upset!”

Ali's lips part and for a second she looks as angry as Daniel has ever seen her. After a lot of blinking and quick breathing, her mouth flattens and she swallows it all down. She ends up saying nothing more than a very tight *sorry*.

“You know, there really wasn't anything,” begins Daniel, but then Susan's mother gives him such a comprehensive look of *who are you and what is someone like you even doing in my house, standing on my spotless kitchen floor near the drawer with* (he's guessing here) *our fine silver* and it's not like he can make any kind of satisfying reply to this inquiry without signing his death certificate (*lady, you should've seen what I was doing over by your fridge half an hour ago*). So he falls silent.

Oh, they are really playing all the hits tonight, he thinks. And to think he imagined this sleepover business was just going to be him cuddling with Ali all night, maybe holding her hand? Sneaking a kiss on her cheek. He was going to play it smooth and slow like Peter Gabriel.

“Are the rest of your friends here too?” Mary asks Johnny, but before he can reply, she shouts at the ceiling for her daughter.

“*What*!” comes Susan from what sounds like upstairs still.

Daniel is almost impressed; there is no way Susan isn't aware of the situation down here and yet does she slink guiltily down the stairs, already formulating an apology or excuse like Daniel would? Maybe there is something to learn from her after all.

“I think I'm gonna go,” he says, to no one in particular. Ali doesn't so much as glance at him, and he doesn't glance at Johnny to see what he's doing because Daniel has decided he doesn't care. He nods a couple times and takes a step – and then looks down at his socked feet and sighs.

As Mary and Susan proceed to hold an increasingly hostile conversation at full volume across the house, Daniel wonders how ill-advised it would be to interrupt and ask for his shoes from her bedroom upstairs.

Fifteen minutes later, Daniel and Johnny leave the house with their shoes. They are lucky their ears haven't fallen off from the hard twisting they received as Mary marched them through the first floor to the front door.

“Jeez,” says Daniel, rubbing the side of his head. He casts a look back at the house: specifically the second floor where Susan's bedroom window was cluttered up by several heads. “I guess Dutch and Tommy are staying,” he says, not really caring either way, except it means they were spared everything he just went through and that seemed about right in terms of the overall fundamental fairness of the world.

“Yeah, guess so,” says Johnny.

He hunches in his jacket and, not looking at Daniel, starts down the sidewalk to where his stupid hotshot car is parked half a block down. Daniel makes a slight face at his back and turns in the other direction. It's a long walk back to Reseda, and he figures he should get a start on that.

Not even a minute later, a red convertible pulls up beside him. Daniel ignores it and keeps walking. An annoyed sound from the driver is somehow audible over the idling engine. He ignores that too.

“Look, would you just get in, LaRusso?” says Johnny.

Daniel casts him a look of disbelief. “Why, you figure out where you wanna bury my body?”

Johnny, for some reason, gives him a bunch of disbelief right back. “I figured maybe we should, you know – talk?” And he widens his eyes at him like he thinks Daniel is being slow.

“Talk, right,” says Daniel, continuing down the sidewalk. “Talk. Uh huh. Yeah, think I'll pass, thanks.”

“*Why*? Don't you love talking?” Johnny lets the car drift forward, glancing at the road every couple seconds to make sure he doesn't run up over the curb. “What the fuck, man?”

Daniel sighs and puts his head back, staring at the sky. He turns in

place and faces down his would-be needy killer. He puts his hands on his hips and says, “Look, I just don't see the point – I already know your half of the script.”

“Oh, really,” says Johnny, sticking his elbow out over the driver door. When Daniel raises his eyebrows and nods real slow, he says, “and how's that go?”

He spreads his arms. “You want me to do the whole monologue? Right here on this sidewalk in the Hills? Half a block from Susan's house? Under this streetlight?”

Johnny's eyes go narrow and he says with pure disdain dripping from every deliberate word: “If I knew the military coordinates, I'd give you those. Let you tack them on the end of your stupid list.”

Daniel pauses. Johnny gives him one of his insufferably exaggerated hate-you-so-much frown-smile things and waits.

“Okay,” says Daniel. “Well!”

Johnny tilts his head like he's hard of hearing. “Well?”

Daniel turns and starts walking again.

Trek

He just needs to think, is all. A little space and time to think, which is why it's so perfect that—

“You know it's like five miles back to Reseda, right?” says the snide stalker in the flashy car to his left.

“And Gandhi walked two hundred,” he shouts back without looking over. “Five is *nothing!*”

—it's *so* perfect he now has plenty of space and time to mull over life's little tangles. All he needs to do is keeping putting one foot in front of the other and take some deep, steady breaths, and let his mind relax. If Mr. Miyagi was here – well, if he was here, he'd probably give Daniel a ride. But if he was here and maybe his truck had coincidentally run out of gas because he was secretly trying to teach Daniel something, what would that something be?

So his body did something unexpected; he's encountered puberty, it's not exactly unheard of. But this situation was more than that. It was like his body and brain were in cahoots and left his secret-better brain out in the cold, and they should really know better by now than to *do* something like that. Cut out the smart guy and it only causes trouble – trouble like sucker punching a bigger, taller boy on a beach when that boy has already proven himself to be kind of an unreasonable person.

“You are the most ridiculous person I've ever met,” says his stalker.

It's not that he hasn't ever considered the possibility; the kind of shit that gets thrown his way, especially since he came to California? He'd have to be seriously thick. But he honestly isn't walking around gazing awestruck at the male form. He'd have to have some kind of death wish, for one. And secondly, boys were generally less interesting than girls. Sure it's fun to kick a soccer ball around with them, but have you ever tried actually talking to one? Daniel likes talking to girls – how is that not the straightest thing in the whole world?

He pauses and turns to his stalker, who depresses his brakes and throws his head back against his carseat like, *finally*.

“Do you like talking to girls?” demands Daniel.

“Talking?” says Johnny blankly. He squints and shifts in his seat and

says a little aggressively, “I like *kissing* them. Who has time for talking when you can kiss them?”

See, that's so transparent! thinks Daniel. He laughs under his breath and shakes his head, starts walking again. Like, try harder, pal.

“Seriously?” says his stalker behind him, and the red creeps forward in Daniel's periphery again.

Okay, but he's doing a lot of avoiding here. If he was his own opponent, he wouldn't be meeting his own eyes, and Mr. Miyagi said always to do that, so – so—

What the hell was that back there? It was like he was a completely different person, and Johnny was a different person, and those people really wanted to get it on.

When Daniel blocked Johnny's punches, he'd felt strong: an unfamiliar feeling. He's spent most of his life just feeling like himself, and that was always fine, but then occasionally someone takes issue with him and that's less fine – but he has never felt strong before. If he was strong then, does that mean he's weak the rest of the time? He isn't sure he likes thinking about the world in those terms.

And it wasn't just the blocking. It was the way Johnny had reacted like some of his strings were cut, the way he'd fallen into Daniel unquestioning. And if being able to *stop* Johnny was heady, the idea that he might be able to direct or, or control him, get him going in some way was—

He doesn't like any of this, he decides. It is too unfamiliar. Too risky. Johnny Lawrence clearly has a million issues, and some of the most prominent are his temper and violence – god, why can't he just leave Daniel alone?

“LaRusso, I'm not going to hang out here all night, waiting for you to get over yourself.”

Daniel wheels around and takes two big, lunging steps forward to slap his hands down over the top of the driver door, shocking both of them. The car slams to a halt.

It's still gone, he realizes as he stares down into Johnny's clear, clueless blue eyes: that pragmatic layer of fear he has always had when dealing with Johnny Lawrence is still missing, rubbed off like a cheap varnish. Probably around the time Daniel was trying to rub off

on him. This is bad news, because it's not like the other boy has changed at all. He wanted to break Daniel's jaw like, an hour ago.

Daniel has forgotten what he was about to say – something cutting, he bets. Yeah, something really devastating.

“You remember 'The Tortoise and the Hare'?” he says instead.

Johnny's face twists. “What?”

“The fable, man. Aesop's fables? C'mon.” And this garners no recognition, which makes Daniel really wonder what they teach people over here. He continues doggedly, leaning over the side of the car and saying into the other boy's stupid, too-open face:

“It's a story of unequal competitors, alright. You got the tortoise, who is smart and determined, and then you got the hare, who is a dick. They race, and even though the hare is supposedly so much bigger and faster than the tortoise, he *loses* because he thinks he doesn't even have to try for the win, he just assumes it's *his*.”

And here Daniel stares down with great expectation; just call him Pip. Johnny's eyes crawl over his face, and he doesn't look any less confused.

“So,” says Johnny after several cars have navigated around the convertible, horns blaring, “are you the hare in this situation, or—”

“Jesus!” Daniel shoves away from the car and wheels around, ready to continue his storming of Reseda.

This time Johnny doesn't follow him.

Sidewalk / Library

“Well,” says Susan before school Monday morning, “you don't *look* like Johnny roughed you up.”

Daniel hitches his backpack up his shoulder. He glances at Ali, but she is so intent on watching the roof of the school, she misses this chance at a wordless exchange of weighed looks. It's fine, though, he can still fix this.

“That's because he didn't,” says Daniel. “I'll have you know I defended myself, actually.”

Susan makes a rude noise of disbelief. “Really.”

“Yeah, really. What, that's so hard to believe? You shoulda seen it,” and here, unfortunately, Ali *does* look down and give him a weighted look, and he falters at the memory of what they would've actually seen: what he keeps seeing in the random odds moments of the day. He hurried adds, “He tried coming at me, fists swinging, and I blocked his punches.”

Susan snaps her gum. “Uh huh.”

“Here, I'll show you.” He dumps his backpack on the ground and puts his hands up in front of him, like he had in the kitchen the other night while he was backing up in terror. He beckons at Susan. “Alright, c'mon. Try to hit me.”

“She's not going to try to hit you,” says Ali, a split second before Barbara hits him.

Daniel jumps and rubs his shoulder. “What the hell, Babs?” he asks her, aghast and betrayed.

Barbara glances round at them all, looking faintly embarrassed. She shrugs, uncertain. “I wanted to try it. The guys always make it look like it's kinda fun.”

“You didn't block that,” observes Susan.

He turns to her. “I wasn't expecting it!”

“Yeah, your defense sounds real useful,” she drawls, widening her eyes at him. “Foolproof.”

And okay, maybe he has some more work cut out for him. But still. “But *still*, if this is what I can do with only a couple weeks of training under my belt, soon enough I'm going to be unstoppable.”

“What do you mean, 'this'? You didn't do anything except take a punch from Barbara. That should be like, negative points.”

“Sorry, Daniel,” says Barbara, looking guilty already.

He sighs and bends to grab his backpack – and some instinct has him lunging to the side and twisting around, and here's Johnny: hand still outstretched to shove him from behind.

“That wasn't bad,” says Susan. “But we already knew you were good at running.”

Titters of stupid laughter from the Cobra Kais. Daniel meets Johnny's eyes and glares. He can't look away from the threat of him, but he is also painfully aware that Ali has stiffened on the edge of the circle. He needs to be careful here.

“You know, there's still supposed to be a truce on,” he says, but he holds his arms ready, and it's nothing like fooling around a minute ago with the girls. He feels like he'd react if a fly came at him now.

Johnny flicks a look down his body: registering the defensive way he is holding himself, or maybe just thinking about what it had felt like to pin Daniel to the fridge and let him strain against his larger body. Whichever it is, his eyes go dark and his mouth thins.

“Was just trying to help you with your backpack, ever think of that?” he says, obnoxious, and he shoulders roughly past Daniel on his way into the school, taking the smell of his shower-clean skin and dry-cleaned sweater with him.

Daniel grits his teeth and keeps his eyes on the others as they follow Johnny; flinches minutely when Dutch feints at him. When they've gone, he drops his hands.

“Guess you guys didn't make peace while you were trapped in the pantry with Ali,” says Barbara.

“We didn't exactly talk much,” he says. “what with trying to hide from Susan's parents and all.” And he glances at Ali, but she is back to looking impassively at the roof of the school.

Can he fix this?

“Oh, that's,” says Daniel, helpless to do anything but watch, “yknow, that's – wow. Yeah, great. Thanks,” he adds.

“You're very welcome,” says Barbara, brandishing the sheet of stickers before tucking them away into her folder again. She smiles at him, confiding. “I have another set at home.”

Daniel looks sadly down at the cover of his physics notebook, now decorated with a large sticker of Andrew Ridgeley and Andrew Ridgeley's shorts. It all happened so quick.

Barbara continues, “This way, *I*'ve got Michael, and you've got Andrew, and it's like two halves of a heart, see? Like we're in a club.”

“It's great,” he says again, because it is too late to do anything about it. He makes himself smile at her, because after all she'd basically just admitted to being his friend, and that was nice. It *is* nice, he tells himself as his eyes return to the tanned male thighs screaming out from the cover of his notebook. He'll just never close his notebook ever again in public. Big deal. People have made worse sacrifices in the name of friendship. At least she wasn't asking him to jump off a bridge or something.

“He's staring again,” says Barbara suddenly.

Daniel looks up from Andrew's bright eyes, distracted, and searches the room for a second before finding Johnny looking quickly away. The other boy is loitering over among the World Book Encyclopedias, painfully obvious.

“You know, maybe you should try talking to him,” she says. “Ali looked really upset this morning. Maybe all this has gone on long enough? Imagine if we could all hang without someone bleeding, wouldn't that be nice?”

And what a weird question, given that nine times out of ten, *Daniel* was the one who ended up bleeding. What is he supposed to say to that? No?

“Yeah, fine,” he says on a sigh.

He pushes back from the table and crosses the library at a casual pace. Johnny glances over and his eyes widen; he hurriedly looks back to the shelf like he's super into like, the alphabet. Maybe he likes the look of the little symbols; gosh, wouldn't it be cool if they all meant something?

Daniel wanders down the other side of the stack, eyes running absently over the line of history books: a dozen for the colonial days, one covering all the pre-European civilizations in the hemisphere, another dozen for the World Wars.

Johnny watches him approach, eyes wary between the uneven skyline of books and the upper shelf.

“What do you want, LaRusso?” he asks when Daniel nears.

He runs a finger over the stiff canvass spines of the books. He shakes his head. “Nothing really, just thought maybe we could – talk.”

“Now you want to talk,” says Johnny, and he glances down the row at the rest of the library. “Here. At school.”

Well, it's not like he was going to talk to the guy in private, he isn't *insane*. “I'm just thinking, we should come to some kind of agreement that will preserve both of our reputations.”

“I don't know what you're talking about,” says Johnny.

Daniel hesitates. He narrows his eyes. “No?”

Johnny shrugs and widens his eyes at him through the shelf. Daniel tongues the corner of his mouth and huffs a disbelieving laugh. He shakes his head; glances back at the library. No one is watching them. If they both sidled to the end of the row, no one might even be able to see them, not from that angle.

He notices Johnny is watching his mouth when he looks back to him.

“I just think it's best for both of us if you leave me alone from now on,” says Daniel, throat dry.

“What about you,” says Johnny, drifting to his right, to the end of the row.

Daniel angles his head to keep a vigilant eye on him. “What about me?”

“Are *you* going to leave *me* alone?”

He grits his teeth and reaches for his calm detachment from the week before; it's harder to grasp for some reason. Maybe this whole thing is Johnny's way of disabling his defenses? Everyone keeps saying he is such a great fighter or whatever; maybe Daniel is underestimating his cleverness.

“I never did anything to you,” he says, turning to the end of the row, where Johnny is now leaning his shoulder against the shelf. Probably completely hidden from the rest of the library, Daniel thinks randomly.

Johnny folds his arms across his chest. “LaRusso, you've been a massive pain since you first showed up here.”

And Daniel should probably refute this bald lie. He should lay out the sequence of events from an objective perspective – which happens to match his perspective – and maybe finally get the other guy to see how plainly delusional he is in his wounded pride or whatever he wants to call it. Daniel cannot and should not and therefore will not let this twisted version of the truth perpetuate itself any further into the future. It's propaganda, is what it is, and this is exactly what he is thinking about as he steps in toe-to-toe with Johnny at the concealed end of the library shelf and stares up into his eyes.

Johnny freezes in his faux-casual lean, his usual bullying loom glitching into an uncertain hover. His hands are tight on his own biceps, and his knuckles are reddened like he'd spent the past couple days punching various surfaces. Probably wishing all those surfaces were Daniel's face.

“It doesn't have to be like this, you know,” says Daniel, watching as Johnny's pale lashes fall in a slow blink.

“Like what?” asks Johnny.

“Like – you could just pretend I don't exist, and I'll do the same to you. Call it a mutual ostracism.”

“Ostra,” he begins and confusion momentarily shoulders aside the other fog. “Like the bone thing? Isn't that for women?”

“*What*?” asks Daniel, now at a loss himself and forgetting the rest of what he'd been about to explain, which was that Johnny didn't have to take it personally because lots of cool people had been ostracized; the

Athenians did it all the time.

Johnny shakes his head slightly. “What?”

And he's looking at Daniel's mouth again. Their faces are very close together. This isn't what Daniel had intended. When he breathes in, he gets that scent again, and its more potent here indoors: in this constricted space that otherwise only smells of books, which is a smell he has always liked.

“You should back up,” he says.

“Why should I,” says Johnny, but he's already done it. He looks down at his feet like they've betrayed him, and Daniel stares at them too because that had felt like a magic trick.

Oh, this is bad, he thinks. He takes a step backwards down the row, and another, and another, and stares at Johnny gaping after him between the shelves. This is really, really bad.

“How did that go?” asks Barbara when he collapses back in his seat at the table.

Daniel stares sightlessly down at Andrew Ridgeley's shorts and does not answer.

Cafeteria / Gym

Since he first started at West Valley, he has had this useless voice in the back of his head going *danger, danger.* The voice was annoying – not because it was wrong, but because it was a big distraction from his conquest of Ali. And now the voice is still going, but it has changed its tune, or frequency or something. There's danger, but it doesn't understand it, and hey, neither does Daniel. It's fine, though. He just knows he needs to stay away from Johnny Lawrence.

Ali gets to their lunch table before Barbara, and Daniel skips the line for trays to hasten over and get a word with her in private.

“Where's your lunch?” she asks, only glancing up enough to take in his empty hands.

“Not hungry,” he says; a lie, he's starving, actually. “Anyway, I thought we should talk.”

Ali sets her fork down carefully on the edge of her tray and fixes her eyes on him, frank and expectant. He stares back.

Over her shoulder, Johnny and his friends arrive at their own table, nudging elbows and laughing, and why are they so cheerful all the goddamn time? Is it that fun, being the biggest bullies in the school?

“Sorry, am I supposed to say something here?” says Ali. “Because I kind of thought you were going to direct this conversation.”

“Right.” He looks down at his folded hands and takes a breath. “I just want you to know, that what you saw – what happened, I mean. It doesn't mean anything – no, listen,” he says, insistent as she sits back on the bench, looking impatient. “I'm not saying it doesn't mean *anything*, okay, obviously it means a bunch of things. If you follow it all to certain logical conclusions, yeah, it probably means some things. But I'm telling you,” and here he tries to inject sincerity into his eyes and hold her gaze with all the shining belief of someone reaching for a refreshing cup of Kool-aid in Jonestown, “that I am making a *choice* for it to mean nothing.”

He is master of his own mind, after all. If he can control his fear and anger, he can control this.

Ali looks at him, unreadable. “I'm not sure it works like that. Do you

have any idea how many of these conversations I had with Johnny when we were dating last year?"

Daniel falters, brow lowering. "Just how many guys has he macked on?"

"*None,* oh my god," she says, flushing, "that's not what – look," and she takes a breath, pressing fingers to her eye.

"Ali, I'm telling you I like you," he says quickly. "Okay? From the first moment we met, I've liked you. You have to see that. And it didn't stop being true just because of one freak moment in someone's kitchen."

She drops the hand and looks at him levelly.

"I might, I guess, I have some – other things going on," he says carefully, "but that has nothing to do with us. I like you. I don't like him. And that's what matters, isn't it? What we want, what we choose?"

She doesn't look entirely convinced, but she doesn't yank her hand away when Daniel reaches over the table to take it. Her fingers are slim and neat, soft. They feel good in Daniel's bigger hand. Warm and secure. Perfect.

"Oh, is this finally happening," says Barbara, arriving at their table with her tray of food. She perches on the bench beside Daniel and glances between them curiously.

Daniel looks into Ali's eyes. He smiles. "What do you say, how about a date? I have a feeling it'll be a lot more clear-cut with just the two of us."

Ali glances at Barbara, who busies herself with opening her carton of milk. After a second, her fingers bend, hand curling into his own until they lock and fit like jigsaw pieces.

"Okay," she says, the nerves in her eyes settling or maybe just getting tucked away, out of sight. "Sure."

Over her shoulder, Johnny has twisted around and is staring across the cafeteria in their direction, but Daniel doesn't let on he's noticed. He keeps his eyes on Ali, and only on Ali, and he widens his smile with confidence.

There are certain rules of changing rooms that Daniel has followed ever since they were forced to start using them in the fifth grade.

Rule number one: don't look. Not because he has ever been overcome by attraction to the various unclothed bodies around him, but because nothing good could come of looking. People get really touchy about their bodies, and historically, he has what some term a punchable face: it's just not a good combination.

Rule number two: talk a lot. If you're talking, no one is worried you're watching or judging. Pure casualness. Who cares about how much that one guy fills out the front of his briefs, did you see the Yankees last night? (Except that line doesn't work right now, because baseball season is over and anyway, you can't mention the Yankees to anyone in California. They just get sore about it.)

Rule number three: change quickly, but not *too* quickly. There is a studied quick pace to it that he has honed over the years, one that gets him in and out and in clothes again with fair briskness but to any observer does not look at all hurried. Anxiety in the changing room draws the eye like blood does sharks.

Rule number four: never let yourself be the first or last person in the room.

That Monday, Daniel fails to follow every single one of these rules.

In his defense, he's distracted. He forgets to talk at Allen, the quivering asthma case who usually changes next to him. He is slow in hauling his shirt over his head. He accidentally glances down the row and sees the strong line of Johnny's bare back; the firmness of his chest as he turns to shove his balled-up sweater into his locker; the smooth flex of his body as he shoves his jeans down to his ankles and bends to rip them free of his feet.

It all looks different now. The danger is still there, but the voice in his head doesn't recognize it anymore. Before it saw pain and now it's overcome with curiosity: what can that body do? What can we make it do?

Somehow before he knows it, the room is emptying out, and he still hasn't changed into his gym sweats. He puts his eyes forward and drags his jeans down, steps out of them. While he's still looking down at the floor, a shadow appears on the bench right behind him.

He straightens and turns, and Johnny is there in his gym clothes, frowning at him.

Daniel laughs slightly in disbelief. “You just can't leave well enough alone, can you.”

Johnny glances around the room, expression like he's listening for any sign others are still inside. Finding no such sign, he says to Daniel, “You need to be less obvious.”

“*Me*?” says Daniel. “Are you kidding?” And his contempt gives him the strength to take his jeans and put them in his locker, baring his lower half as he grabs his sweatpants. He remembers his changing room rules and deliberately slows his pace.

Johnny reacts before he can bend to put his foot in the leg, shoving Daniel back against the lockers. Dull sound of body hitting metal. His hands swallow Daniel's shoulders and he leans in.

Daniel puts his head back and doesn't let his expression change. “Thought we said we were leaving each other alone,” he says with a steadiness he doesn't feel.

What he does feel he can't let escape into full awareness: the soft worn cotton of Johnny's gym clothes against his skin, the warmth of his groin and taut strength in the thigh pressing forward against him.

“That what you want?” says Johnny, and his gaze and hands travel down their bodies pressed together. Red stains his cheeks.

Daniel has never had any sense of himself as an erotic being before – pleasure is something he feels, of course, but the concept is a noun not an adjective. Except the sight of his own bare legs and white briefs crowded by Johnny's larger body looks obscene somehow.

He can't believe people let him walk around like this, he thinks nonsensically. How has society not stopped him?

“Of course,” says Daniel, swallowing. “That's what I want.” He has no idea what they're talking about.

Johnny's hands hit his hips and wrap around the pelvic bone with bruising strength. He pulls his head back and says clearly, “Say it then.”

Daniel can't look away from the thigh between his legs. Little blond

hairs cut down the firm line of muscle. An unmistakable bulge in the grey shorts inches from his own.

“Say what?” he said.

“Tell me what you want me to do,” says Johnny, and one of his demanding hands slips down from his hip and palms his ass, hard. Daniel jolts forward, hands grasping for purchase and finding nothing except the other boy's arms.

“Lawrence, LaRusso,” shouts the teacher from the door on the other side of the locker bank, and the sound of his voice drives a wedge into the moment and splits it apart: suffocating desire on one side and cold horror on the other.

“What's got you dawdling?” he continues.

Johnny stares at Daniel, eyes wide again like he's oh-so incredibly surprised and innocent. He stands back, arms loose and ineffectual. Daniel looks back at him, darkly incensed.

He puts his head back against the lockers, takes two short breaths, and says loudly, “Nothing. We're coming.”

The door creaks shut. Daniel licks his lips and considers Johnny, who has transformed back from whatever the fuck that was moments ago. For some reason, the sight is frustrating. Slowly, deliberately, Daniel reaches down and adjusts himself within the confines of his briefs. He watches Johnny's eyes drop to watch, lips parting, and jesus.

He kicks off the locker and orders, “Get out of here.”

Johnny leaves without hesitation, and it's the final straw. For a long moment after, he has to put his hot forehead against the cool metal of the locker and just breathe.

History / Bathroom

With the relieving exception of training with Mr. Miyagi after school, Daniel is unaccountably distracted every moment of the next twenty hours. He eats dinner alone standing up at the kitchen counter and doesn't taste a bite; he watches Johnny Carson deaf and blind, blinking only when he realizes he's gone too long without. In bed, he spends hours staring up at the ceiling.

When a car passes down Saticoy and chases shadows around his room, he imagines he feels them pass over him on the bed and stick like tar: they settle in, make themselves at home, reworking him into someone he can't recognize.

He only has so many things going for him, he thinks as he stares dully down at his cereal bowl the next morning. His mother is saying something about a new job, and he nods in the right places.

He needs to be smarter than this.

“Hey man, I hear you're taking Ali Mills out,” says the guy in History class who sits next to Daniel most days. Matt, perhaps. He looks like a Matt.

“Where'd you hear that?” he asks, and then Johnny comes into the room.

Daniel doesn't look up. Not even a glance. He doesn't blink either, just keeps looking at Matt, or maybe it's Mark? He has only spoken to Daniel three times prior to this salvo, and one of those times was just to ask him what the answer was to question four on a pop quiz – and Daniel deliberately gave him the wrong answer, but then he'd actually been wrong about that question, and they both ended up getting it marked down, so MattMark never discovered his deception. Does this make them friendly now?

Johnny passes between them and heads for his seat in the back of the room, his stupid tight khaki-clad ass interrupting their conversation. MattMark says something about hearing the rumor around school.

“Slow news day, huh,” says Daniel, and MattMark gives him a funny

look.

“So where you taking her?” he asks, recovering. “You know she's from the Hills, right? You're looking at, like. At least fifty bucks just to get to first base.”

And Daniel really isn't interested in this conversation, but he can feel Johnny's eyes from five desks away. So he sort of grimaces and nods and says nothing. Turns back front and tries to think of anything other than the boy behind him.

Ali is from the Hills. He already knew that. So is Susan and the rest of them. Big deal. If it doesn't matter to Ali, then why should it matter to him? And apparently people know about the date. People like capital-P people: People. People like We the People or maybe the mob the Founding Fathers always warned about? It's fine regardless. Not like it means anything to him. Say it goes badly and The People hear all about that too. Not like his reputation can get worse. Not like he's running for class president or something. Six more months and he's done with this place. Besides, it's not going to go badly. He and Ali are great together. Soon as they ditch all the background noise and extras, they are going to have eyes for nobody but each other; the moment she smiles at him, this whole semester is going to suddenly feel worth it.

He wonders if Johnny has heard the rumors.

He wants to turn around and look at him, but that way lies madness. Perhaps literally: he isn't entirely confident in the other boy's sanity, and he thinks maybe whatever he has might be contagious because all Daniel can think now is: who would he be more jealous of, me or her?

So he doesn't turn around. His knee jumps under his desk. He flips a pencil through his fingers, chews his lip. How many minutes left in this period? Too many.

He makes it through twenty minutes of Mr. Harris's lecture on the importance of rail infrastructure on the outcome of the Civil War before raising his hand and asking to go to the bathroom.

He takes a leak he doesn't really need, fingers light and leery on his oddly-sensitive dick. Then he sticks his overheated face under a cold faucet.

He hangs over the sink for a minute afterwards, staring down at the drain in the center of the white porcelain as the water drips from his face and dries stiff on his skin. He tries to will himself the strength to go back to the classroom; with every second that passes, a howling panic creeps from the center of his chest and spreads throughout his body. But his feet won't budge.

What's he waiting for?

The bathroom door opens, and Daniel presses up from his forearms on the edge of the sink. His eyes lift to the mirror and meet Johnny's on the far side of the room. His teeth make tight neighbors, and he breaths out long and slow through the clench.

What is this, really? Who even *is* this guy? What does he *want?* First he couldn't wait to kick Daniel's ass, and now – now—

The only comfort in the moment is how angry Johnny looks – even though he had to have known what he was doing, surely. He watched Daniel leave the room, and he waited, and then he had to have raised his hand and asked to be excused as well. And he chose to come to this bathroom, which was the lesser used bathroom two turns down from the one near the History room – did he check that one first before coming here?

Daniel's hands tighten hard on the edge of the sink before he makes himself let go and turn around. Johnny watches him, and he doesn't say anything, because of course he doesn't; his usual script of threats and insults doesn't exactly fit the moment, not for what he wants – if he even knows what he wants, and it's likely he doesn't. Maybe he followed Daniel on a whim and a prayer, some instinct insisting Daniel would know, and the absolute worst part is, Daniel thinks he does.

“Fine,” he says, and somehow none of his own uncertainty and confusion reaches his voice. “C'mere.”

Johnny doesn't cross to him in frantic relief or anything like that; he moves in slow and wary like Daniel is the danger here, and this saps the last of Daniel's patience.

Soon as the other boy gets within arm's length, Daniel pivots and pushes him back against the metal of the stall. He steps in and kisses him before he can do anything more than open his mouth to complain.

The room collapses out like cheap set dressing.

Daniel feels like he's somehow consuming him, or maybe being inhaled in turn. Some kind of reciprocal exchange is happening and who cares if it's equal or what it all means. He exists now only in the tightening circle of Johnny's arms. He only has hands so he can slide one up the back of Johnny's head through the stupid-fine strands of his hair, the other squeezing his shoulder; his hard bicep; the severe cut of abdominal muscle at his hip.

Johnny likes being touched, it turns out. He likes it a lot. When he finally breaks and makes a sound, it's high and keening: caught-back like a known tell at a card game. It makes Daniel bite Johnny's lower lip and pull at it playfully, something like a grin curving into the next kiss, bumping against the edges of it until Johnny adjusts his own lips to compensate, and then they're perfect again.

When the next sound comes, it's screeching and intrusive, and neither of them understand it for a second or two. Daniel tears his mouth away and stares in horror at Johnny, who looks like he's been trying to French kiss a vacuum hose.

“What?” says Johnny, sounding even dumber than usual. His hands are still slung easy on Daniel's hips, thumbs and forefingers tucked into his waistband for purchase.

“Was that the bell?” says Daniel.

Vertigo / Detention

So anyway, they both get detention for skipping class.

Daniel tries to explain he didn't mean to, and he even briefly dispenses with his dignity and starts going into detail about the fictional bowel trouble that kept him in the bathroom all period. But Mr. Harris isn't having it. He offers him the nurse's office or detention, and Daniel has to take the latter because he's pretty sure the school nurse would call his mother otherwise.

Meanwhile, Johnny accepts the detention and practically runs from the room like Daniel's come over all contagious. Whatever. It's not like Daniel wants to look at him either. He thinks he is starting to get vertigo when he looks at Johnny Lawrence. An inner ear issue, maybe.

He keeps his head down the rest of the long day, and this goes double for when Johnny's around, which as previously noted is far too often.

Daniel doesn't budge from his chair in study hall and during lunch he steals Barbara's Walkman under the pretense that he just really needed to listen to Make It Big, because he hadn't had a chance yet. She is so sympathetic to his plight, he almost feels bad for lying.

He feels much better upon reclining along the bench. Ali pets his hair while he closes his eyes to the ceiling. The music energetically blots out the rest of the world, Johnny across the room. It's almost restful. At one point Ali lifts Barbara's headphones away from his ear and asks him if he's really going to lie there all all lunch, to which he tells her very earnestly, wake me up before you go-go.

Except then a passing Mr. Alpert orders him to sit up, so he doesn't really have a choice.

Gym that day is not worth lingering over. Daniel walks the track and sticks close to Allen, who is not as grateful for the company as he really ought to be. Turns out Allen thinks Daniel attracts trouble.

“Look, I'm just trying to get through the day, man,” he says, walking backwards in front of him so they can have it out, face-to-face like men.

“Well, can you do it away from me?” asks Allen, plaintive. “Those karate guys have left me alone all semester, and I kind of like it that way.”

Unbelievable betrayal from Allen.

Detention is less crowded than last time, so it makes no sense that Johnny should choose to sit in the desk right beside Daniel. He doesn't even seem to be aware he's done it, or like he means anything by it – in fact, he casts him a suspicious look, which Daniel meets with great indignation. Then he puts his head down and goes to sleep almost immediately.

The only other students in the room are three big, rough-looking guys who make Johnny and his friends look like Care Bears in comparison. Complete with color-coding, Daniel thinks: eye flicking to Johnny's red jacket in the corner of his eye. He shifts forlornly in his seat at the realization he can't share this amazing thought with anyone else. Johnny wouldn't find it very funny, probably.

Or – maybe he would? Maybe there is depth somewhere in that glossy, well-conditioned head. He can't be all karate and gay stuff all the time, surely. Maybe he has a secret sense of humor, and Daniel just needs to open a line of dialogue, reach out like a human being. Good ole Carl Sagan didn't include any jokes in the message he beamed into space a decade ago, and Daniel has always thought that was a big mistake. Why would anyone want to come to a planet without a sense of humor? Or worse, what if they get contacted by the wrong aliens, the Allen of aliens?

Anyway, it is in this same spirit of good will and search for intelligent life that Daniel rips a page from his calc notebook and writes down a short, concise message pertaining to the Cobra Kai jackets and Care Bears. He thinks about it for a moment and jots down a few other thoughts: stray witticisms. Then he folds this note decisively four times over and turns in his seat to where Johnny is slumped over his desk, face down.

Daniel glances at the teacher at the front of the room and delicately clears his throat. She doesn't look up. Neither does Johnny.

Daniel rolls his eyes and reaches out to smack Johnny's shoulder; the other boy jerks violently in his seat and sits up, staring around the

room. He has a red mark in the center of his forehead from the desk.

His eyes land on Daniel and immediately narrow with hostility. Daniel puts his hands up and waggles the note meaningfully before slowly depositing it on the edge of his desk. Johnny stares at it like it's a dead mouse.

Daniel checks the teacher again; she is still marking papers. The three big guys are playing cards. No one is watching them.

He props his head on his elbow, staring at Johnny. *Read it*, he mouths and he kind of tries to smile like he would if he was talking to one of the girls. It feels wrong on his face, and Johnny's answering expression tells him it might look wrong too. So he drops the smile and sticks his pen impatiently in his mouth, widens his eyes like, *well?*

Johnny grabs the note and takes his time unfolding it. His ears are very red. He reads the note; he must read it at least ten times, and by the end of them all he still seems blankly confused. He looks at Daniel.

Daniel sucks on his pen cap and tries smiling again. Message received? Hello, anybody out there?

“What the fuck is this supposed to mean?” says Johnny, far too loud. The gang types look over their shoulders; the teacher looks up.

“Is there a problem?” she asks, and they both hastily explain, no, no, we're fine.

Johnny slouches down in his chair, legs sprawling wide. He shoves the note away into the pocket of his chinos. Daniel assumes this means the note passing portion of detention is over, but then Johnny rips out his own page from a notebook.

He only folds it *one* time before slapping it down on Daniel's desk. Shoddy note security; Daniel hopes there's nothing incriminating in this thing.

WAS THAT SOME KIND OF FAG CODE? reads the note. I DON'T SPEAK FAG.

Daniel nods neatly down at the note. He folds the page back up and returns it to Johnny, who looks between him and it in confusion and maybe hurt, like he expected Daniel to fold the note up in his shirt pocket next to his heart and treasure it forever. Daniel has zero desire to kiss this guy right now, he realizes with relief.

Maybe he is cured?

Miyagi

The sun is setting over the ocean, turning the empty stretch of beach a deep umber. Daniel sits in the cooling sand, massaging the arches of his feet because he'd been balancing in the sifting, dragging shoreline for what felt like an eternity. His toes feel abraded and raw, and he can feel a stiffness creeping up his ankles to his calves – but he'd done it. He'd somehow managed to stay upright against the crashing waves. He's tired, but he thinks he's maybe kind of happy.

A towel lands over his head, hastening the rush towards night.

“Very good, Daniel-san,” says Mr. Miyagi above his head. “Balance strong. Tomorrow, begin learn how to punch.”

Daniel drags the towel down around his neck and looks up at him. “Really? Great, that's great.”

He uses the towel to dry his hair and then tucks it around his shoulders like a blanket and gazes out at the horizon. Punching, he thinks: it'll be something to have the same level of control and intent with punching that he has started to get with blocking. Next time one of those Cobra Kais messes with him, he'll know what he's doing, if it comes to that. Yeah, it'll sure be something.

“Getting dark,” says Mr. Miyagi, like he's reminding him.

Daniel looks up again, distracted. “Oh, right – guess we should get home, huh.” He climbs to his feet and follows the man back to his truck, absently drying the rest of his body with the towel.

“Hey, can I ask you something?” he says when they're five minutes away from the apartment complex. Five minutes feels like the right amount of time for him to broach the subject and get a quick escape if the conversation gets into awkward territory.

Mr. Miyagi makes an assenting noise, or so Daniel is going to read it.

“I was wondering,” he says, turning onto Saticoy, “have you ever. You ever – like the wrong person? Someone you know you shouldn't, I mean.”

“Ah,” says Mr. Miyagi, knowing. “Daniel-san nervous about big date.”

“What? Oh. I mean,” there's no way forward here: abort, abort,

“yeah,” he says, dragging it out. His tone sound unconvincing even to himself, because why would he be nervous about the date with Ali? He's going to bring his A-game, he's going to knock it out of the damn park. “Yeah, it's just. We're very different people. And I don't know what it says, about me. That I like someone so – different.”

“Miyagi once fall in love with wrong girl,” he says, musing.

Daniel glances at him, surprised. “Oh, yeah? What happened?”

“Miyagi left country,” he says stoutly. “Never return.”

Daniel waits a couple seconds, looking between the road and the serene man in the passenger seat. But Mr. Miyagi doesn't take it back, doesn't go *just kidding, haha, got you good, Daniel-san!*

“Oh,” he says faintly. He turns into the parking lot of the South Seas. “Well, good to know I have options, I guess.”

Dream / Locker

Johnny pushes him.

He pushes him and Daniel tries to dig his heels in, stand his ground. So long as he is standing he has a chance of getting out of this. But his feet don't cooperate, or maybe the ground doesn't; it keeps shifting beneath him, the ocean pulling away below, and there's a fence at his back. Chain link. He can see freedom so clearly on the other side, or he would except he's not looking. The fence rattles and rings, and Johnny pushes him.

The hit never comes but it's always coming. It's still coming.

Johnny pushes him. His hands are heavy, pinning Daniel in place, and he's still standing but for how long. He's frantic with it: how long. How long until Johnny stops pushing, how long until his hands venture down and discover Daniel's dick is hard, and then it's all over.

Johnny is on his knees in front of him, and Daniel's back is against the stacks in the library, and anyone could see them if they just turned their heads to look, but Johnny doesn't care and neither does Daniel, because Johnny is pressing his face against his groin and breathing him in, and his hands are on Daniel's ankles beneath the hem of his jeans, holding tight like he thinks Daniel might run or fall, but Daniel isn't doing either of those things. Daniel is standing his ground.

Everyone can see them. The hit is still coming.

Johnny is in his gym shorts and nothing else, and his chest is pink and slicked with sweat, and he is kneeling in front of Daniel, and this is how Daniel does the murder: in the library, with his dick.

Johnny is in his gym shorts, thin grey cotton sweats softly tenting beneath Daniel's hand, and when he folds his fingers and twists his wrist, Johnny squeezes his eyes shut and he's beautiful and he says *please* and the hit is still coming.

Daniel's back is against the fence, but it can't be his body doing this; he knows his body, and it's not supposed to be in this much pain, and it's not supposed to tremble as it shuffles over Johnny kneeling in the library. His legs don't look like this. And he has never watched his own dick while jerking off, so he can't say if it looks right then but it looks wrong now: under Johnny's large hand; filling out and growing

under the hot fog of his gasping breath, dark against the pretty pink flush of his face.

Daniel shoves away from the fence, the shelf, and catches himself on Johnny's strong shoulder. He bends his knees a little like he's getting ready to defend himself, and he guides his dick towards Johnny's wet, hungry mouth. Ali is standing at the end of the row, eyes wide in horror but that doesn't stop him because the hit, it's still coming.

“You're acting really strange,” Susan tells him as he retrieves his Physics book from her locker.

He frowns, distracted by the collection of goldfish crumbs scattered over the fringe of the book. He grips the text by its spine and shakes it over the floor, loses a couple old worksheets he had folded between the pages.

“No I'm not,” he says belatedly. He bends to collect the worksheets, squinting at the dates at the top. They're almost three months old.

“Oh, right, you've convinced me. Is this about your date with Ali this Saturday? Because if you're going to turn into a weirdo little spaz, I think it'd be better for everyone if you called the whole thing off.”

Daniel puts the worksheets back in the book and slams it shut, tucks it under his arm. He puts a hand on his hip and gives her a look.

“Hey, I'm just looking out for people,” says Susan, exchanging her own textbooks and shutting the locker.

“Yeah, you're a real good Samaritan,” he mutters.

They start walking down the hall. Daniel chews on the moment for about five seconds of tentative peace before he can't help it, because it's been bugging him for days if he's being honest with himself. And if he can't be honest with himself, then what hope does he have lying to everyone else?

“You know, you should probably just stay out of it,” he tells her. “I know you've said stuff to Ali about me, and that hasn't helped any.”

Susan hugs her books to her chest and tilts her head, eyes smiling malevolent. “And what *stuff* do you think I've said, Daniel?”

“I don't know, I'm not your priest. But I'm just telling you – lay off. Me and Ali, I think we could really work. I make her laugh,” he adds, because that's one of his most winning qualities. No way did Johnny ever make her laugh. Laugh at him, maybe. A pity laugh.

“Laugh at you, maybe,” says Susan. He pushes his mouth out and regards her darkly, and she shrugs. “Okay! Hey, if you're so confident, then why are you worrying about what I say? Whisk her off her feet, if you can. Go ahead and try.”

“Yeah, I *will*.”

“So do it then.”

“We're going to be so great together, it's going to make you sick.”

Her eyes go narrow. “Too late. I'm chugging Pepto Bismol every time I see you trying to flirt.”

“Well, it's a good thing pink's your color,” he says, and then he's at the Physics classroom. “Okay, see you later.”

She flicks a hand, not stopping. “See you.”

Rally / Challenge

One problem with all your school friends being girls is that sometimes those girls go out together for an activity and leave you stranded alone in a setting you'd really prefer not to be alone in. The school holds a pep rally and Daniel is stuck in the risers with his book.

He glances up from where Clifford is telling Connie about the enduring stability and connection of marriage absent sex and looks across the gym to find the girls. The squad is bunched together near the free throw line, talking as they wait for the rally to begin. Ali and Susan look almost unrecognizable in their cheer get-ups. Barbara, oddly, looks perfectly centered in the universe, and he can't work out why.

“Aw, what's this? Danielle didn't also join the cheerleading team?” Dutch; Dutch's sneer, too close for comfort.

Daniel looks over and suppresses a groan at the sight of Cobra Kai descending on him. He's suddenly very glad he picked a spot at the end of the row. If things get rowdy, he can always jump over the side.

The guys range over and through the remaining empty spots in the risers: Tommy and Jimmy racing up the benches to see who can touch the wall first, never minding the students who flinch and lean to stay out of their rampaging way; Bobby takes advantage of Dutch's distraction to try to push him down several levels; meanwhile, Johnny tightrope-walks his way unerring towards Daniel.

Before too long, they're all present: Tommy and Jimmy sprinting down the risers three at a time and thumping down on the seat behind him. Dutch plowing into them from the side before settling. Johnny sits next to Daniel and sets his legs wide like he's got a painful cyst on his dick. Bobby sits next to Johnny.

“Now what's Daniel reading?” asks Tommy, and a second later the book is snatched from behind. Daniel half-twists to get it back before he can stop himself, but this puts him facing Johnny, so he grits his teeth and turns back to the gym and waits for the inevitable.

“*Lady Chatterley's Lover*?” reads Dutch with dawning delight, and on cue the Cobras all snigger. “What's this gay shit?”

“See, this is how stupid you are,” says Daniel. “The man and woman

in that book have so much sex, it was actually banned from publication for *years*." No straighter book on the planet, he figures.

"So, what, you're reading smut in school?" says Tommy, disturbed. He quickly tosses the book back in Daniel's lap. "Like, right here around other people in the gym? What kind of pervert are you?"

Daniel does not put his hand over his face, but it's a close thing. Down on the gym floor, Ali is looking over in concern. He forces a smile and a wave, but this seems to provide only marginal comfort.

Beside him, Johnny shifts. His right thigh presses against Daniel's and he says, "Heard about your little date tomorrow."

Daniel doesn't move, doesn't look over. He says casually, "You know, back in Newark we had better things to talk about than other people's love lives."

This is of course a bald lie, but it's not like anyone is going to perform a fact check. There are some benefits to moving clear across the country: you get to lie through your teeth about how great your hometown was, and also no one at the new school knows you didn't crack five feet until halfway through sophomore year.

Daniel doesn't move his thigh away; he doesn't want to attract attention.

"You know she's only going out with you to get back at me," says Johnny.

"And here I thought she was into me for my mind and good looks," says Daniel cheerfully without looking over. He slaps his thigh; misses and slaps Johnny's instead and takes a sort of vicious joy when the move makes him jump. "Whew, love a woman with an ulterior motive. Shows she's forward-thinking, a planner. You know, has a good head on her shoulders."

The band strikes up a very brassy and meandering rendition of *Louie Louie*, and the students in the stands all start to cheer, presumably for the sheer novelty of something finally happening. The students in the row in front of them stand, blocking the view of the cheerleaders getting into formation; behind them, Tommy and the others stand too, catcalling loudly.

In this enclosure of distracted bodies, Daniel risks a look at Johnny. He is ready to say something dismissive – just leave us alone, man; it

has nothing to do with you – except the look on Johnny's face renders the words an afterthought.

He isn't glaring at Daniel; the features of his face have the structure for it, but none of the content. His eyes are narrowed and his jaw is tight, but he only looks confused and searching. And why would he be confused? He can't possibly think there is anything going on between the two of them. As far as Daniel knows, the guy is still planning to beat his face in at the tournament in a few weeks. It's no basis for a healthy relationship, or even a healthy hormone-fueled make-out session. Even Johnny Lawrence can't be this dense.

“Ali deserves better than you,” says Johnny, taking Daniel completely by surprise.

And now, please welcome the all-star starting line-up of the West Valley Wildcats boys' basketball team! Show 'em your support!

“What, 'cause I'm from Reseda?” demands Daniel.

“No,” says Johnny, voice going cold where Daniel's had gone hot. He leans like he's issuing a threat and says, “Because you want me to suck your cock.”

He doesn't blink. The students around them start shuffling in place and sinking back down in their seats. Daniel turns back to the front as the wall of bodies lowers like a drawbridge, revealing the cheerleaders in a line bristling with pom-poms, now joined by basketball players dribbling and shooting hoops. He takes it all in with eyes that don't really see.

Johnny thigh is still pressed against his own: a long hot line.

How dare he, thinks Daniel. He runs his tongue along the back of his teeth and shakes his head slightly. What does he know about what Daniel wants, or what any of this means. Why would Daniel spare a single thought for the big jackass to his left when Ali's right here in front of him, wearing a skirt and a cheer sweater that rises to hint at her midriff whenever she lifts her arms?

Does this guy think he's in charge here? The idea burns him.

Daniel slides a suspicious look under his eyelashes over at the other boy, but Johnny is watching the pep rally with bland boredom. He's wearing his stupid black headband today, Daniel notices. What a tool.

He wants to shake that composure. Suddenly, more desperately than anything else in the world, he wants to wipe that certainty and confidence from Johnny's face. Not good enough for Ali? He doesn't know anything.

He shifts to his right and takes his leg away; Johnny almost blinks, but catches it before his lashes can connect.

Now what do we have here? Some invading Pirates from Paramount?

Below on the gym, an unfortunate student in a pirate costume is led forward from the corner of the room like a lamb to the slaughter. The students in the stands all begin to boo loudly, and the fake pirate shakes his plastic sabre at the basketball team.

Beat their asses, yeah! shouts Tommy. *Let's get 'em, kill 'em!*

“You know what I think?” Daniel says suddenly, twisting back to Johnny and leaning in so he won't be overheard; easy, in the bloodthirsty colosseum din of the room.

“What's that,” says Johnny. He is affecting indifference, but his hands hanging between his wide-set knees are in fists. Below, the basketball players are dribbling and passing in circles around the pirate, who is spinning like he's about to pass out.

“I think you're so jealous, you can barely breathe,” says Daniel in an undertone, kind of breathless. “I think you can't stand the idea that I'm going to take Ali out, and we're going to have a good time, and she's going to finally find out what it's like to date someone who isn't a *bully*, who likes her – like really likes her. I think you were a shitty boyfriend and by now, I think we both know why—”

Johnny snaps and lunges, sliding over and shoving and dragging Daniel hard to hang out over the open side of the risers. His fist twists into the front of Daniel's shirt, warping and ripping the cotton. His face is red and tight.

“Whoa,” says Bobby behind him, grabbing for Johnny's shoulder. He is easily shaken off. “Johnny, man—”

“Shut up,” says Johnny, and it's hard to say who he is talking to but it doesn't really matter because he repeats it: one for everybody, “just shut up, shut the fuck up. You little fucking prick. I'm going to kill you.”

Daniel says nothing. He lets Johnny hold him and gives absolutely nothing, just a steady gaze.

“Hey! Hey, I see you!” calls Mr. Alpert from seven feet below, beside the risers. He waves a hand. “I see you boys, don't think I don't. Stop that this instant, or you're looking at detention.”

Daniel's eyes slide away and back. His heart is pounding and he knows he is about to do something really stupid.

“Why don't you suck my dick,” he says, and Bobby's eyes shoot wide in disbelief and the other Cobras howl, and Johnny does what everyone in the world expects him to do. It hurts. A lot.

Anyway, they get another detention.

Detention / Street

Daniel ignores the incessant buzzing of the wasp to his right and hunches further over his desk and book. The gamekeeper is trying to be very tender with Connie, who is crying over a chicken for some reason – he doesn't know why, he's clearly been too distracted in his reading today. Because of the wasp.

“Hey,” says the wasp again. “Pssst. LaRusso – *Daniel*.”

Daniel sucks on his front teeth and turns his face to stare stonily at Johnny in the next desk over – should he start calling it his 'usual' desk? Since this is apparently going to be an ongoing feature of their lives?

Johnny's eyes go immediately to the rising, purpling bruise over Daniel's left eye, and something in his expression flinches, but not much; not enough.

Johnny lifts a folded piece of paper and offers it across the space between their desks. He looks at him, all bright-eyed and expectant. When Daniel doesn't move to accept it, after a too-long pause, Johnny awkwardly leans over to place the note on his desk.

Daniel turns back to his book, raising it to block out the sight of the waiting note. This means he's staring at the text from only six inches away but whatever – fuck Johnny and fuck his stupid, likely-inadequate peace offering of a note. Now that his friends aren't around, he thinks he can try to be whatever-this-is-supposed-to-be? Not a chance.

Johnny makes a sound that better not be a sigh, and he slouches down. The sight of his sprawling legs on the edges of Daniel's perception is oddly enraging. How dare someone so easy and boyish also be a terrifying violent nightmare of a person. Fuck him.

“LaRusso, *c'mon*,” whispers Johnny at the ceiling, sounding bored out of his mind.

Daniel snaps, slamming his book down on the desk; the teacher at the front of the room glances up with a cursory frown. The repeat offenders in the corner ignore him; they've got a fourth today and this means they get to play Euchre.

He snatches up the note and almost tears the paper in his irritation. This had better be good, he thinks, knowing it won't be – there's an odd satisfaction in his anger now, and he welcomes any fuel to the fire. He can almost feel the weight of Johnny's attention as he unfolds it.

ARE YOU EVEN GOING TO SAY SORRY? is messily crossed out, blackened with violent broad strokes of the flat of a pencil – but still legible. The second draft of the note is barely better: I'LL SAY SORRY IF YOU DO

Daniel lowers the note.

He breathes and somewhere out in the world the ocean is still always rolling forward; somewhere the breeze ruffles meadows of grass and blossom and the tops of lakes like the one where he and Mr. Miyagi often train under the gorgeous evening sun; and somewhere inside him is a guy who is going to *fucking kill Johnny Lawrence—*

Johnny squawks as Daniel goes for him, and they tip over into the next aisle in a terrific clatter of desks banging and limbs flying and shouts of bloody murder.

The teacher requires the help of the four hoodlum card players to pull them apart. She casts one unsympathetic look between Johnny's bleeding nose and Daniel's renewed swelling eye and she only says:

“More detention, I think.”

Johnny is banished to the opposite side of the room, which is just fine by Daniel! Maybe he can finally get some reading done.

He resumes his own seat and shakes out his shoulders, disgruntled and vaguely pained. He gingerly stretches his neck. He picks his book back up. Where was he? He thinks the groundskeeper is about to make a move on Connie.

His face was pale and without expression, like that of a man submitting to fate.

"You lie there," he said softly, and he shut the door, so that it was dark, quite dark.

With a queer obedience, she lay down on the blanket.

Daniel pauses, eyes going fixed and distant until the words blur before

him. He puts the book face down on the desk and follows it up with his head.

“Hey,” calls Daniel, run-walking his bicycle across the parking lot to where Johnny is practically jogging towards his own bike. “Hey, Johnny, wait up.”

Johnny wheels around and puts his hands on his hips, expression snide and combative. “*What*,” he says flatly. “I'm late for karate.”

“Yeah, me too,” says Daniel, as if Mr. Miyagi was the kind of man who even owned a wristwatch.

The reminder that they both were heading towards karate training momentarily stalls him in place, making him rethink everything. Perspective, this what he needs more of, he thinks. Can't keep following his instincts all the time: look where they lead. He and Johnny are probably going to face each other in the upcoming tournament and they hate each other; surely he doesn't need any more reasons not to do what he was about to do?

Johnny watches him. He's still wearing his headband, the afternoon breeze whipping his pale hair back as if to make sure Daniel will notice it. He notices it. For some reason, it just doesn't matter.

He just needs to know, he thinks. There has to be some appropriate amount of knowledge he can gain here that will finally let him go, *okay, I'm done*. He hasn't reached it yet. He so badly wants to be done.

“What are you doing after karate?” he asks.

Yes / No

Mr. Miyagi's face tightens in alarm as soon as Daniel shows up at his house. He turns quickly from his workbench and moves Daniel around under the shed light to examine his eye.

“Boys' teacher agreed, no fighting before the tournament,” says Mr. Miyagi, and Daniel finds himself in the peculiar, unhappy position of having to make an excuse for the shiner.

Because what else was he supposed to, explain that yeah, he and Johnny got into a fight, but it's okay, except it's *not* okay – like not even remotely okay – but he's handling it? And by handling it, he means he's handling Johnny, but whoops, not like you think!

“I fell off the stands at the pep rally,” he says, and this story is just weird enough for the man to accept, though he still hesitates for a long moment. “Not my best look for a first date, I'll admit,” he adds, and this joke seals the deal. Mr. Miyagi shakes his head and dismisses the situation with a regretful flap of his hand, turns away muttering to himself.

Daniel deliberately thinks only of karate for the next couple hours.

He gets home and occupies his restless hands with making dinner. He's careful with the seasoning but doesn't really taste much when eating. He hopes it's not too bad and leaves a covered plate for his mother on the counter. Does the dishes.

He wonders if he should clean the place up, and then he gets annoyed, because this isn't a date and he's not trying to make a good impression: like it is even possible at this point to make a good impression. That's not what tonight is about. What is tonight about? He doesn't really know, he just knows it needs to happen. Get it over with, or something.

He is perfectly useless as it ticks over to eight o'clock: can't read or work on homework, can't focus on the TV. By the time the knock on the door comes, he's almost annoyed.

“Took you long enough,” he says, as he opens it and Johnny

immediately shoulders inside like he's smuggling stolen goods. Daniel shuts the door firmly, turning to scowl at him. “Your dojo is not that far away, why are you so late?”

“Because I was late to karate?” says Johnny, like it's obvious. “Sensei kept me back.”

Daniel doesn't want to talk about that guy; last time he tried, Johnny flipped out. And something like that is probably inevitable at some point, but he'd like to make it like, at least ten minutes.

“Sounds kinda intense,” he says in the very best neutral tone.

Johnny gives him a searching, suspicious look but finds nothing incriminating because Daniel's innocent. He says, almost grudging, “You have no idea.”

They stand there looking at each other for a couple seconds, and it's awful. Daniel finally breaks and wheels around to the kitchen. “You want anything to drink?”

“What do you got?”

“...Water,” says Daniel, too-late in remembering that some niceties aren't meant for universal deployment.

“I'm good,” says Johnny, unimpressed. He steps forward still in his shoes and looks around the apartment. “Man, this place is kind of a dump.”

Daniel braces his hands on the counter and stares hard at him. Johnny looks away from the framed family photos on display and notices the look. He goes slightly red.

“Sorry,” he mutters. “Didn't mean it like that.” Which makes no sense, and is a shitty apology to boot.

“You want to explain why you're always like, a hundred times worse in front of your friends?” asks Daniel, while they're on the subject of Johnny being an asshole. “Like with everything going on, why not just avoid me? That shit in the gym today didn't have to happen, if you'd just stayed away.”

Johnny puts his hands in his jacket pockets and shrugs tightly. “Tommy was talking about you and Ali right before, and it pissed me off.”

Daniel wanders slowly down the length of the counter, hand trailing over the pock-marked formica. “And why did it piss you off? Do you even know?”

Johnny follows him with his eyes. “What kind of question is that?”

Daniel reaches the end of the counter and hesitates. Is this a safe distance? Is he in the clear if he needs to move?

“I'm going on that date tomorrow,” he says. He gestures between them. “Whatever this is, it's not – we're not like,” he has to make himself say it, “going out.”

Johnny's mouth pulls up into an incredulous sneer. “*Duh*. Guys don't date each other, jesus.”

Okay, radical acceptance from Johnny Lawrence. This guy has somehow never sounded more or less closeted.

Daniel cocks his head and wanders forward. He means to stop at a normal distance, but the physics gets in the way: magnetic forces at work again, and he did kind of bad on that unit, huh. Never did get a handle on it all.

He steps into it until their chests are brushing, and he has to tilt his head to maintain eye contact. Johnny immediately tries to dodge it: lids falling, gaze skating over Daniel's face and down his body. He freezes when Daniel gets a hand on his forearm. Cool leather and firm corded muscle beneath his hand, and it's not being used against Daniel; just then, it seems ludicrous to think it ever could be.

“And what do guys do together, Johnny?” he asks, voice deep in his throat.

Johnny moves like he's in a trance and he cups Daniel's face, thumb brushing over his cheek bone. The touch is light but completely destabilizing. It doesn't linger; can't. His hand slides briefly back, into Daniel's hair and then down his neck, his back – Johnny folds to his knees: fluid and deliberate, too slow to be a drop.

Daniel's still got his hand on his forearm. Johnny's the guy in a movie dangling over the edge of a cliff, and Daniel's five fingers are his only hope against gravity.

Daniel lets him go. Johnny looks up like he's a distant shrinking presence, the sky growing larger at the edges and the ground coming

fast below, and Daniel says:

“Take off your jacket.”

Johnny takes off his jacket. He's only wearing a T-shirt underneath, his preppy sweater no where in sight – must've felt hot after working out, Daniel thinks absently. He puts his hand over his head, thumb sliding beneath the black headband—

Johnny grabs his wrist, hard.

Daniel meets his eyes, reads what's there. He shakes his head slightly and tells him he'll give it back. Waits it out while Johnny fights with himself over it; makes his hand light and undemanding on his head meanwhile. Finally, Johnny releases his wrist, and Daniel slides the headband backwards off his head.

The cloth is strong, but worn soft. Warmed from a day of exertion. Johnny's eyes follow it clutched in Daniel's hand as it swings to his side, and then it's like he can't look anymore. He presses forward a few inches and closes his eyes into Daniel's stomach, mouth jamming up against the roughness of his fly, and Daniel cuts him some slack and tells him it's okay, he's doing good. It feels like the right thing to say, and maybe it is, because Johnny reaches up to hold his hips, dig the tips of his fingers beneath his waistband. And he asks hoarsely, can I.

Yes, says Daniel. Like it's a kindness. It should feel silly, but it's anything but: it's deadly serious.

Earlier, when he'd tried to plan or picture how it would happen, he'd assumed they'd go into his bedroom. But now it's happening, and it turns out the setting doesn't matter; the furniture doesn't matter; the family pictures staring at him matter a little, so he quickly looks away after accidentally glancing over. Nothing matters except Johnny's strong, sure fingers undoing his fly and dragging his jeans down a few inches.

Daniel's white briefs are already spotted with damp, the dark patch clinging to the constrained hard path of his dick. Any other time in his life, this would be something to hide in mortification, but he doesn't get the chance – Johnny wastes no time flattening his tongue to it, pinching his lips around the wet cotton and sucking. He reaches around and shoves his hands beneath the back of the briefs to grab Daniel's ass and for a rocking moment, Daniel half-stumbles over him, lurching to catch himself on his shoulders. Johnny seems to like that,

being used like a support structure: his shoulders relax for a second and then firm up beneath his hands, and he pulls Daniel in more securely.

He drags the briefs down, freeing Daniel's dick and catching the head of it in his soft, watering mouth. Daniel bows over him, hands tightening. He makes a stupid sound, and he thinks Johnny likes that too.

It doesn't take very long for Johnny to figure out: the mechanics of it. He never makes the same mistake twice. Turns out he's an eager learner, when the task and reward are the same thing and that thing is Daniel's dick. He even figures out how and when to breathe: an athlete's preternatural instinct for balancing all his body's needs, taking oxygen and Daniel in tandem.

Daniel can't do much more than hang on, tangling one hand around and through the headband until he risks cutting off circulation in some of his fingers, the other hand dragging over Johnny's head and shoving down the neck of his shirt to scrape at his back, any skin he can get at. His body is crossing the event horizon, and it's no time and all of time before he's coming into Johnny's mouth.

His knees buckle, and Johnny's hands on him loosen enough to let him slide down into him, sprawling with his knees practically astride the other boy's. Johnny props him against his chest and seamlessly switches tack to suck lightly on the corner of his jaw.

It's hard to think and harder to move, but Daniel makes himself. Even as he's still gasping into the dark cotton of Johnny's shoulder, he works a hand up between them and moulds it over the hard dick still trapped in his jeans.

Johnny's lips stutter over his neck. His breath catches.

“Cmon,” says Daniel, rasping and almost delirious. He turns his forehead over his shoulder and flicks the button of Johnny's jeans free. He repeats it, nonsensical: cmon, cmon, cmon.

Johnny's dick is weeping, the head smearing wet into the cradle of Daniel's palm. The angle is all wrong and completely right, like he's coaxing something out of the other boy, pumping it up from deep within the ground.

Daniel takes his mouth away from his shoulder and tries to sit up, wants to get his eyes on Johnny – who's not having it. No good. Daniel

scoots as close as he can without trapping the slow movement of his hand and wrist, and he licks Johnny's chin, follows it up with a slight bite. Bumps their faces together.

“Cmon,” he says again, and Johnny's eyes shift up, helplessly finding him. “Show me what you got, man.” And he follows the challenge up with a swift kiss: a demand, or maybe a comfort, he doesn't know.

Johnny's mouth falls open for him and he comes, releasing over Daniel's hand, the pulse point at his wrist. Daniel licks inside his mouth while holding him through it, and then he gingerly extricates himself from below. He feels calmer, more sure of himself. He feels great, actually.

He takes his mouth away, glancing down at his wet hand. He doesn't have a cloth. He could just wipe it on Johnny's shirt or something, but something in him flinches back from doing that. It feels too ugly.

Johnny's eyes are closed again. His head bends at the neck to rest on Daniel's shoulder, his back rising and falling quickly but softly as his breath settles.

“Here,” murmurs Daniel, out of his mind as he brings his hand up. He can't see Johnny's expression, but after a second he feels the tickle of his mouth, catching the come with his tongue, carefully cleaning Daniel's hand. By the time he's done, Daniel's half-hard again, and for some reason his chest hurts.

He doesn't know what to say, but it doesn't matter because Johnny suddenly brings his arm up and slings it sideways, his own body determinedly heading the same direction, and then they are lying on the floor, half-tangled together and quiet with it. For a time.

After a while the sweat dries, and Daniel starts to get a little cold. He figures they need to get up and Johnny needs to leave before his mother gets home. It's hard to get motivated. He senses something very, very bad is going to happen the moment Johnny leaves. He can feel it coming for him.

“You know, you don't have to be such an asshole to me at school,” says Daniel.

Johnny rolls fully onto his back, stretching out his legs with a grunt.

“You don't get it. You never do.”

“What's there to get, man?”

“It's rule number one – for normal people anyway,” he adds, casting an offensive look sidelong at Daniel. “You, you just come to school and walk around breaking all the rules, and then you get angry with me for trying to follow them, and—”

“What *rules*?” demands Daniel.

“You have to act a certain way in front of people,” explains Johnny impatiently, “because otherwise they might suspect you. It's not just safer, it's – it's better, too. Smarter. Like, it's way cooler if there's a difference between what you let people see, and what you *do*. You're the one in control then. It's like the classic, *Drunken Master*.”

“It is?” says Daniel blankly to the ceiling. “The what?”

“*Drunken Master*, man,” he says, twisting to look at him in disbelief. “The movie? Kung fu?”

Daniel is so lost. “What?”

Johnny somehow manages to look disgusted, superior, and pleased all at once as he shoves up onto his elbows beside him and sets to explaining. Apparently there's a famous old kung fu master who specializes in a style of fighting that looks like a drunk person, and somehow this is all very cool and totally relevant to their current situation. Daniel lets Johnny ramble on about the movie, eyes moving over his open, animated face; the tousled sweep of his hair; the shy hook of his mouth as he talks.

The bad arrives early, and it's worse than he thought. No, Daniel thinks.

No.

Golf / Stuff

Daniel doesn't say much after that, but Johnny doesn't seem to notice his odd silence. The other boy sighs a little and yawns, stretching with his whole body: his fingers reaching into the air, his legs for the opposite wall. Daniel watches him and his left hand drags carefully across the carpet, out of sight.

“Okay, well,” says Johnny after a moment. “I'm gonna go.”

“Yeah, that's a good idea,” Daniel starts to say, and then Johnny does a kip-up.

He looks down at Daniel immediately after, as if to check that he'd seen; as if Daniel could possibly have missed the unnatural convulsion of the body next to him, that insane conquering of physics. Ugh.

“Show-off,” is all Daniel manages, and he regrets it when Johnny grins, fast and easy.

“Just showing you what you're missing,” he says, bending down to snatch up his jacket. He pulls it on, flipping the collar. He pauses. “Okay, uh.”

“Yeah, bye,” Daniel says quickly. Beneath his hip, his hand tightens.

Johnny gives him a nonplussed look but shrugs and heads for the door. Daniel holds very still until he's left the apartment, and then he lets out a breath and lets his head drop back against the floor.

He stares at the ceiling, waiting for his pulse to return to normal. Eventually, he brings his left hand up and opens his fingers, letting the black headband dangle down over his face. Twitches it with his fingers so it swings a little through the air like a pendulum and catches one of the ends between his lips. Breathes in, and it smells of Johnny.

“*Fuck*,” he says, word muffled through the cloth. He climbs to his feet and goes to jerk off in the bathroom like a civilized person.

The date starts off badly.

“Oh my god, your eye looks so much worse than it did yesterday,” says Ali, taking her hands out of her pockets like she wants to cradle his face, and he angles away from the grasp.

He needs people to stop with the concern already. It's just a bruise, it doesn't mean anything. And when Ali's parents stare and deliberately *don't* ask about it, he finds himself volunteering in a too-loud tone that he does karate, you see; they don't appear comforted by this knowledge. Guess when you're a kid from Reseda, karate sounds less prestigious. He might as well have said he likes shooting off Uzis in his spare time.

The date continues to go badly. Despite a whole week of everybody in earshot at school reminding him that he was taking Ali out on Saturday, he never actually came up with a plan.

“Where you going, honey?” asks Ali's mom.

“Oh – I don't know. Where are we going?” asks Ali.

“I don't know,” says Daniel, and it's not his best moment. The house at his back is really getting to him. He has to stop himself from dancing in place. “Where do you want to go?”

But Ali's the best and doesn't bat an eye. “Golf N' Stuff?”

“Golf N' Stuff,” Daniel says confidingly to her parents, and he almost pulls the charm off, except then he kicks loose a brick from their fancy stoop. And then his mom's car dies on the street right in front of the house, and they have to hightail it out of there before Ali's parents change their mind and decide to call the cops on them for kidnapping their daughter.

But the date gets better once it's just the two of them, like he knew it would.

Okay, so he gets a little competitive with the air hockey, but she just laughs at him. At the mini-golf, he twirls his putter in the air and talks a big game, but he's pretty hopeless at it, and she laughs at this too. Near the end – and he swears he isn't even angling for this, he wouldn't know how to begin to play the coy ingenue! – she steps in to help guide his shots: her chest soft against his back, face tucked close to his shoulder and hands on his wrists. He's never been held like this before, and it feels pretty good.

When he misses the easiest shot in the world, he turns to her,

laughing. “That one was on you, actually.”

She shakes her head, full of mirth. Digs her elbow into his side before grabbing his hand to pull him to the next game.

It's a great night, like something out of a fantasy: a beautiful girl at his side and they can play any game or take any ride in the place, and he's not counting the change in his pocket and worrying about any economic trade-off, guns or butter, bumper cars or trampoline. He lets himself spend everything, doesn't argue when she insists on paying half, because they're having fun, aren't they. Under the lights of the park, her smile and eyes sparkle.

In a photobooth, he turns his head into her cloud of curls and breathes; in the strip of photos after, he looks happy. They look right together. When she takes his hand again, he doesn't want to let go.

“So why'd he do it?” asks Ali eventually, when they're taking a break from running around to drink some sodas.

Daniel doesn't need to ask who or what she's talking about. “He was pissed about me taking you out tonight – I guess Tommy was running his mouth or something. His stupid pride, I don't know.”

Ali looks down at her soft drink, fiddling with the straw. He tries desperately to think of a change in subject.

“I don't think he was mad about me,” she says quietly, and Daniel goes still. He wants to ask; he is never going to ask. Unfortunately or fortunately, he doesn't need to, because she continues, matter-of-fact, “Johnny doesn't like girls. I think he really tried, when we were dating – he tried so hard, it started to really mess with my head. We must've fought about it a million times. Like, god, I just wanted him to admit it. And Susan kept telling me to dump him, but he'd just get – *so* upset, and—”

“Susan knows?” says Daniel, alert.

Ali shrugs and nods. “I mean, not exactly. But yes, basically.”

Daniel drinks from his soda, but it's mostly ice now and the straw makes a terrible loud sucking sound. He quickly takes his mouth away and sits with it lamely.

“Sounds pretty messed up,” he says, noncommittal.

“What about you?” she says.

He looks around the park. “Me? What about me? Are you asking if *I*'m messed up?”

And when she rolls her eyes, his smile quiets. He stretches an arm out and pitches his soda into a nearby trashcan, lands back on his wrists and looks up at the lights of the waterslide. Swimming in November, he thinks: what a life.

He realizes Ali is still waiting for a better answer. He looks over, meeting her questioning eyes.

“Hey, I'm here with you, aren't I?” he says. “It's not even a choice – or, if it is, I've already made it.”

She hesitates another second. “Yeah?”

He grabs her hand, entwining their fingers. “Yeah.”

Around eleven, they head back out of the park and meet trouble as soon as they hit the parking lot. It comes in the shape of a slick red convertible, jammed full of leering assholes.

“Ali, hi! And Daniel!” says Susan. The others echo the greetings. “How's it going, you two?”

Johnny looks up at them from behind the steering wheel, and his face is completely neutral. Daniel looks away quickly. He is suddenly very aware of Ali hugging his arm, and he hates that it has stopped feeling good the moment other eyes are on them.

“Hey guys,” says Ali. Daniel does not echo the greeting. “What are you doing?”

“We're going up to the hill, want to come?” says Tommy, and the girls immediately start in on Ali. “C'mon, we'll make room.”

“Oh, I don't know,” says Ali, glancing up at Daniel. “Maybe next time —”

“You should come,” says Johnny, authority cutting over the other voices. He looks at Ali like Daniel isn't even standing there. “I mean, if it's okay with Daniel's mom,” he adds, looking over to where Lucille is

just pulling up.

Susan and Barbara continue to lobby loudly for them coming along, and Ali makes the critical mistake of wavering, which only causes Dutch and Tommy to join in the chorus. Amid the furor, Johnny's attention travels from Ali to her arm tucked around Daniel's, up to Daniel's face. He smiles, close-mouthed, and it doesn't reach his eyes. Daniel seethes inwardly.

“Daniel?” says his mother, meanwhile.

“We'll give them rides home, Mrs. LaRusso,” Johnny calls over. “Well?” he asks them, and now his voice sounds like a challenge; a challenge like the one in Susan's eyes as she watches them; a challenge like the shadow of doubt Daniel imagines in Ali's face when she turns to check with him.

“Yeah, I'll see you at home, ma,” he says.

Car / Mart / Hill

Susan shifts over so she is sitting on Barbara's lap (*oh, don't complain, Babs, you're built like a Viking shieldmaiden*) and slings her legs hard into Tommy's lap, making him jump and pale and glare in swift succession. This kindly frees the seat behind Johnny for Daniel and Ali to take.

There's probably a metaphor in there somewhere, if he was in the mood to look for it: the two of them together under the disembodied Eckleburgian eyes in the rearview mirror.

“You comfortable with this?” whispers Daniel, hesitating with his hand on the side of the car.

“If you'd prefer, you could sit in *my* lap,” offers Ali, and he grins.

“Maybe next time,” he says, and he climbs into the car.

“Watch your shoes on the seat,” says Johnny immediately, the tool.

“I would've gone Dukes of Hazzard, but excuse me, I didn't want to kick Tommy in the face,” says Daniel, settling in the seat. It's close quarters, even with the girls sitting on top of each other. What's the appeal of this car, exactly? He thinks about this for a second and decides: why not. “Kind of a small car you got here, Johnny.”

Johnny twists in his seat instantly, eyes flaring with incredulous hatred.

“Oh ho,” says Dutch from the passenger seat. “You almost have to admire the balls on him. Glad you have balls, I was beginning to wonder,” he adds over his shoulder, and thanks?

“Oh my god, please not this,” says Ali.

“Yeah, man. Can you wait to beat his ass until we get there at least?” asks Tommy. “I'm going to need to stretch my legs before too long back here.”

Because the car's so small, Daniel doesn't add. But he looks into Johnny's eyes and raises his eyebrows a little, and knows the message is received. He smiles, momentarily happy with the universe and his place in it.

“Just get in, will you,” Johnny says to Ali, turning sullenly forward.

She turns around and sits daintily on the side of the car and then sort of lets herself fall backwards into Daniel's lap. Her head lands across Tommy atop Susan's legs and she tilts it further to look up at her.

“Remind me why we're not all currently riding in the gigantic Jeep Wagoneer your uncle got you for your birthday?”

“Ali, please,” says Susan, shifting to nudge her with her foot. “As if I'd ever let these jerks anywhere near my car.”

They have to stop at a minimart on the way so Ali can use a payphone on the side of the building to call her parents and tell them she's staying at Barbara's house that night; the call does not go well. The six of them sit in the car and listen to one side of the escalating argument with varying degrees of awkwardness (Tommy and the girls), regret (Daniel and Johnny), and shameless titillation (Dutch).

“So your mom called Ali's mom, huh,” Daniel says to Susan.

“I told her to mind her own business,” she says. “But that strategy backfired. She's now convinced Ali is the slut supreme of West Valley. It'd be really funny if it wasn't so annoying.”

Daniel shifts, guilty and uncomfortable. He can't help but glance forward and meet Johnny's eyes in the mirror. His lips thin and he deliberately turns his head, looking over to where Ali is clutching the back of her neck and trying not to shout into the phone.

“If you don't trust me, then you should just come out and *say* so,” she says, and Daniel winces.

“It's a miracle she still wants to go out with you,” says Susan idly. “Given how much trouble you caused her before you even went on this little date.”

“Hey, what happened last week was not my fault,” says Daniel automatically, even though, yeah, it kind of was. But who argues in good faith to a crooked jury? A fool. “Blame Johnny for trying to kill me, or Dutch for his stupid rule.”

“Why stop there,” says Tommy cheerfully. “Let's blame Dolin who

made the vermouth, or perhaps the people who invented the game of Spin the Bottle in the first place."

"Hey, I'm open to all possibilities," says Daniel.

"Fine," says Ali loudly across the parking lot. "I won't stay at Bab's! But I'm not coming home right now either, because there's no one to give me a ride. Hope I don't wake you up when I get in *super late*!" And she hangs up the phone, hard. *Ooh* goes the audience in the car.

Daniel looks at Ali with sympathy as she approaches. "Are you sure you don't want to go home now? We can just call it a night, I don't want you to get in any more trouble."

"They're being unreasonable," she says, pink still in her cheeks. "And I'm not going to put up with it. I don't deserve this."

There's nothing to say to that except: okay.

The Hill turns out to be a spot off an unpaved street in an as-yet unfinished subdevelopment overlooking the Encino Reservoir. They park on the shoulder of the road and hike up an embankment; Johnny strides ahead with an open beer in hand, and Dutch and Tommy follow, hauling a cooler between them. Daniel shoves his hands in his pockets and hangs back with the girls.

"I'm sure it'll blow over," Barbara tells Ali, encouraging. "You're the most responsible person I know. They can't keep this up for long."

"We'll see about that," Ali says grimly. "I mean, they still talk like Johnny and I are dating, and that's been over for over half a year." She glances at Daniel.

"I noticed they didn't seem too thrilled about his replacement," he says. He's aiming for joking but it only makes her shoulders slump.

"Sorry about them," she says, and he has to hurry to go no, no, it's not a big deal, honest. Because yeah, he kind of minds, but he minds her minding more. It's not like he's the one who has to live with them.

"Would you girls hurry up," hollers Tommy from the top of the ridge.

"We mean you, LaRusso," calls Dutch.

“Yeah,” says Daniel under his breath, glancing forward. “Figured as much.”

Johnny drinks a beer;
Tommy drinks a beer;
Dutch drinks a beer;
Susan drinks a beer;
Barbara holds a beer;
Ali tucks her hands into the ends of her sweater;
and Daniel chews his thumbnail.

The two of them don't say much at first, because the others are occupied continuing an argument from earlier in the night about whether Ms. Foster the Spanish teacher and Vice Principal Frazer are having an affair (it sounds like they definitely are). But eventually the conversation turns inevitably to karate, and the bet about the tournament.

“But it's not real, right,” says Susan, sipping her beer.

“What do you mean?” asks Tommy.

“You guys aren't *really* going to start going after Daniel again when he loses the tournament next month,” says Barbara. “We're all friends now. I mean, right?”

His social life is so weird out here, Daniel thinks. He wishes he'd grabbed a beer, so he had something to do with his hands. A second after he has the thought, Ali loops her arm through his and rests her head against his shoulder. He glances at her in surprise, and then shifts closer. Okay, so it has it's upsides, he thinks.

“A bet's a bet,” says Johnny stubbornly, throwing back his head to drain his third beer in one swift motion. The long line of his throat barely even moves in a swallow; it's like he just opens it and lets the beer simply drain to his gut.

“Who's to say I'm going to lose?” asks Daniel belatedly. “I know how to punch now.”

“You hear that, guys?” say Dutch sidelong to his friends. “Daniel knows how to punch now.”

“Watch out, Johnny,” says Tommy.

“If you're so confident, why don't you show us what you got,” says Johnny, cracking open another can. With nothing but the moonlight to illuminate his face, he looks very sincere about the offer: a sick tint of excitement runs beneath his words, and Daniel's nerves shiver over in sudden wariness.

He hesitates, wishing he hadn't said anything. Ali's arm tightens around his and she say tiredly, “Leave him alone, guys. Can we have one night that doesn't devolve into stupid karate fights?”

“Why does it even matter so much to you?” Daniel asks him, meanwhile. “I mean, even if you do win next month, what's that really going to prove to anyone?”

“Only people who say winning doesn't matter are the ones who usually lose,” says Johnny, as if that was even remotely an answer to his question.

He wants to roll his eyes, but he's thinking about the boy in his apartment, the one who memorized a stupid kung fu movie and who checked to see if Daniel had seen his kip-up. It's like Johnny Lawrence has a secret, sweeter twin (still stupid, though). It confuses him, and that angers him.

“So you'll do it,” he says, returning to Susan's original point. Ali squeezes his elbow in what might be a warning, but he doesn't look away from Johnny across the circle of grass.

“Do *what*?” says Johnny.

“Next month, if I lose. What your sensei said – it's open season on me?”

The others fall silent from their background muttering and side conversations. All attention turns to Johnny, who takes another long drink of beer. He stares unblinking over the can at Daniel, and maybe it's just the darkness, but he looks like one of those dead-eyed young guys whose photo the news likes to use sometimes when talking about the veteran problem in America.

“Guess that depends on you,” says Johnny at last.

“Depends on me?” he repeats. “Sorry, whether or not you try to kill me depends on *me*?”

“Daniel,” Ali says in an undertone.

“Why are you pushing this, man?” demands Johnny, like Daniel's being such a drag; an inconvenience.

“Are you kidding me?”

“Daniel,” she says again, and this time he sets his teeth and doesn't say anything more. After a moment, he extricates his arm from Ali's hold, but only so he can drape it over her shoulders.

Johnny finishes his fourth beer and crumples it in one hand. He tosses it over his shoulder to tumble and roll down the hill towards the shore of the reservoir. He reaches for another.

Night / Drive / Park

It's past two in the morning when they quit the Hill, and here Daniel tries to take control of the situation, or at least become the power behind the driver's seat.

“Okay,” he says, as Johnny starts his car and tries and fails to get it into first gear three times in a row. “So what we're going to do now is, we'll drop Ali off first since her parents are all – angry and uptight or whatever, and then we'll drop me off—”

Noises of vehement protest immediately issue out from around the car, except from Barbara and Ali, because they've both already fallen asleep.

“Fuck that,” says Dutch, manfully letting his voice be heard even though he is already half way to passing out himself.

“You're the only one of us who doesn't live in Encino,” says Susan.

“Yes, exactly,” says Daniel.

“No, not exactly. You can't make everyone else wait extra long to get dropped off just because you made a bad choice about where to live.”

“Sometimes,” he says, “I don't think you really hear the words coming out of your mouth?”

Susan raises a finger and shoves it at him; nearly pokes Tommy's eye out as the car finally lurches forward, jerking them all in their seats. “Well, hear this – you're getting dropped off last, bucko. Or like, I don't know – Babs and I are going second. What you all do after that is up to you.”

Daniel glances at Tommy, who only shakes his head firmly at him. Dutch is long gone, but it's not like he expected grace from that corner anyway. And Johnny apparently has nothing to add one way or another on the subject, even though he's the driver.

He bites back more arguments, because he doesn't want to sound so desperate the others get suspicious. But he tries one last thing, a perfectly reasonable concern to raise:

“I don't think it's a good idea for Johnny and me to be alone in the car together. I mean, you all heard him – he still wants to hit me.” He

pauses. “He *did* hit me. Just yesterday!”

“'M not gonna *do* anything,” Johnny mutters mutinously, sitting forward in his seat and squinting at the road.

“See? He's not going to do anything,” says Susan.

The car nearly takes out a mailbox on the wrong side of the road, and Daniel ventures to propose someone else should drive – someone like himself: a sober, responsible individual. It is pointed out with a hideous sneer from the front seat that he does not have his license. Daniel counters that a permit surely is better than a drunk half-blind moron. Johnny cranks his radio loud to drown out his voice, and Daniel gives up: on the night, on hope, on life.

“Hey,” Daniel says softly, hand light on Ali's back. “Hey, Ali, we're back at your house.”

She stirs and opens her eyes readily enough, but her expression is groggy as she blinks up at him.

He smiles a little. “I know my lap's pretty comfortable, but you'll probably prefer your bed,” he says.

Think I'm going to be sick, mutters Johnny to no one. Ali's eyes widen and she sits up quickly, apologizing.

“Hey, it's okay – whoa, you okay?” he checks, stretching a hand towards her as she bumps her knee hard climbing out of the car.

She straightens up on the sidewalk and takes a deep breath. “Yes, I'm fine.” She glances around the car and back to him. “I guess I'll see you on Monday? I – I had a real good time tonight. Before, I mean.”

Daniel gives a short laugh. “Yeah, *before*. Me too.”

For a moment she looks like she might bend down and give him a kiss – but then her eyes skitter around again. In the end, she steps back instead of forward. He tries not to read into it.

“Hey, good luck with your parents,” he says, and before she can say anything in response, the car lurches forward with an unholy screech. He is thrown back hard in his seat. Jeez.

“You know, I hope you get pulled over,” he calls forward. “Would serve you right.”

But of course, Johnny does not get pulled over. His life is far too blessed for such mundane eventualities like cops and underage drinking fines or DUIs. Daniel pushes his mouth out and props his elbow on the side of the car. Stares at the passing streetlights.

They drop the girls off next, and then kick Dutch to the curb outside a massive three-story house with a xeriscaped front yard. Tommy wastes no time climbing into the passenger seat, and Daniel slides over into the middle of the back seat, stretching out gratefully.

They pass through the neighborhood of big dark houses, and he begins to get a little nervous. It feels different in the car with fewer bodies as buffers. He shoves the feeling away, not letting himself think any more on it – it's so late. Everyone is tired. He's going to get home and go to bed, and tomorrow he's going to wake up and train with Mr. Miyagi and tell him all about how great his date went.

“See you, man,” is all Tommy says when they drop him off, and then it's just the two of them sitting in the car outside Tommy's house. Daniel's hands go tight on his kneecaps as Johnny gazes at him in the mirror.

“You coming up front or what,” he asks finally, and his voice even sounds different now; it's so fucked up.

Daniel's not falling for it. He frowns and shakes his head slowly. “No, no. I think I'm good.”

Despite the cool night air, he can feel sweat starting at his collar, between his fingers. He doesn't think it would be a good idea to be next to the other boy right now, in plain view of him; at least back here, all he can really see is the side of Johnny's head, and that's nothing special.

Johnny just snorts and puts the car into gear. This time he does it on the first try.

They start heading north into the valley, but something in Daniel's gut tell him they're still not going the right direction – too far east, he thinks, and then Johnny turns right on Burbank.

Daniel sits forward. “Where are you going? Where you taking me?”

Johnny steers with his right hand and puts the other outside the car, spreading his fingers like he might catch the wind, or like he's waving to the trees that line the boulevard. “Relax,” he says lazily, and Daniel remembers the moron is probably still drunk.

“Take me home,” he says. Johnny ignores him, and he hazards, “...That's an order?”

This makes Johnny laugh – full-belly, head-thrown-back laugh. Daniel stares at him in mounting horror.

“Should've moved up front if you wanted to be giving me orders,” he says, and he's smiling like it's a private joke between just the two of them.

Daniel slumps back again, stunned stupid with confusion and disbelief. Bands of yellow light pass over them as they travel down the deserted street, and in the rotation Daniel keeps waiting for the other boy's expression to change, but it doesn't. Johnny watches the road quietly, hand moving easy over the wheel. He seems content, like all he needed was some alcohol in his belly and the right company in the car.

They are well out of any residential area when Johnny takes a left and drives another quarter mile before pulling into an empty parking lot in front of a large deciduous tree. He cuts the engine, and they listen to it tick over into silence.

“Where are we?” asks Daniel, and his voice sounds too loud to his own ears.

“Woodley Park,” says Johnny. The metal of his seatbelt clinks as he unclips it and tosses it aside. The leather creaks as he shifts up and around, and then he's coming at Daniel over the seat.

Daniel presses back, shuffles over to the far right side of the seat. “Hey, wait – stop.”

To his relief Johnny obeys this time; he pauses up on his knees on the seat, arms bracketing the space. “What?” he says, and he has the gall to sound surprised.

“I told you – we're not—”

“Yeah, so?” he says. “What's that got do with anything?”

“I'm dating Ali now,” he says. “So *we*'re not – doing this. I told you to take me home, man.”

“Yeah, you were real insistent what with saying it once and then immediately giving up,” says Johnny, dismissive. “And as for Ali – are you kidding? You guys went on one date, and I'd put a hundred bucks down that you didn't even kiss her.”

“What's that matter?” says Daniel, sitting forward angrily without thinking. He's not going to get lectured about the definition of dating from an asshole who plays semantics about when someone *really* wants to be taken home. “So you think it doesn't, what, *count*? It's different with girls, you neanderthal. It's called being a gentleman.”

“Yeah, fine,” says Johnny impatiently. “Whatever. But you don't have to be a gentleman with me.”

And just like that, Daniel has no words. Johnny sees it, and his mouth spreads in a smug smile. He eases forward and puts a hand down on the seat between Daniel's legs: so close. The other goes on the side of the car over his shoulder, and Johnny leans over him, back an oddly sinuous line as he offers himself.

Daniel looks at his mouth. He makes the critical mistake of thinking about how it had felt the day before: how desperate and pleased Johnny had been to take him, and how nice he'd acted after. Well. Nice for Johnny, anyway.

An insane voice in Daniel's head whispers about the scientific method, and how results need to be replicable to be considered valid. He wants to know if Johnny's always like that afterwards.

Daniel reaches up and rubs his eyes. “None of this makes any sense,” he mutters. He thinks about Johnny just a couple hours previous, staring at him and talking about after the tournament. His stomach twists unpleasantly.

“Sure it does,” whispers Johnny, urging. He's still hanging there, not moving or pressing further, and as the seconds pass it begins to feel less natural and more contrived.

Daniel drops his hand and eyes him from inches away. He gets it. “You're waiting for me to ask, aren't you. What is this, a sting operation? You wearing a wire? 'Make sure LaRusso incriminates himself, we need the words on tape.'”

“It feels better when you tell me to do it,” says Johnny.

In the desaturated night, under the wavering leafless shadows of the tree above them, his eyes look black. They stay on Daniel, and it's like a completely different person is looking out from them: something starved and maybe *too* eager to please. For the first time, Daniel wonders if it even matters to Johnny that it's Daniel he's doing all this with; maybe any boy would do, anybody with the right body.

He doesn't like the thought, and it makes him sound a little rougher than he'd like when he breaks and says, “Go on, then.” He swallows hard as he gives up. “Suck me off.”

Johnny's lashes fall to hide his relief, and he bends forward without hesitation.

Daniel rests his head back into the corner of the seat and put his eyes up into the sky, where one or two stars peek through the dark purple mass of light pollution from the city. His breath hitches once or twice. His hand comes to rest over Johnny's head, the silken fall of his hair.

It doesn't feel real, he tells himself, so maybe it's not. Maybe he's just dreaming.

Dawn / Diner / Damned

It's not that he sleeps so much as he definitely wakes. The space between is lost; he just knows by the end of it that he is cold. Daniel flinches and cracks his eyes: he – god, the sky – *where the hell*—?

There is a warm weight in his lap and an ultimatum from god that if he moves his neck even an inch he's completely done for. He is crumpled sideways in a too-small back seat with his chest and head jammed against the side. Johnny is on top of him, drooling on his stomach.

Daniel twitches as if to sit up and only shifts a few dozen cells in his body before giving up. He groans; he might even whimper.

“Johnny,” he says. “Johnny, wake up, man. We fell asleep – god, my ma's going to kill me. Johnny, wake up.” And he pushes at the other boy's forehead.

Does this count as sleeping with someone? He's never slept with someone before. How many firsts is he going to give this guy? How many lies is he going to have to tell in the future, when someone asks?

Johnny stirs. He turns his head, wiping his mouth on Daniel's shirt – oh, *nice* – and mumbles, “Fuck, my head.”

“Yeah, you drank your body weight in beer last night,” says Daniel. “Now get the hell off me.”

Johnny sits up, rescuing Daniel's bladder from some seriously dire circumstances. He wastes no time scrambling out of the car. Unzips and lets go with heartfelt relief.

He rotates his head along his neck. Says up into the bare branches of the tree, “Can't believe we fell asleep out here. I mean, you passed out, which in the long run might've been for the best. Not like I want to die in a drunk driving accident – what would my ma say? I'd never hear the end of it. But I can't believe I fell asleep too. What the hell.”

“Oh god, shut up,” says Johnny. He is rubbing his face when Daniel turns back around.

He braces his hands over the car and looks at him. The sight of his red eyes and general sickly pallor is pretty cheering, actually.

“Can you drive me home now, please?” says Daniel. “I mean, unless you're in the mood to blow me again.” He pauses, thinking about it; adds graciously: “I wouldn't say no.”

Johnny ignores this and climbs into the driver's seat. He starts the engine, and Daniel hurriedly gets into the car before he can drive off and leave him.

It's just past dawn, so they can't even go through a drive-through to get breakfast. Daniel foolishly thinks this means he will be taken home directly, but Johnny is determined.

“Where are you going,” he asks for what feels like the millionth time.

“You ask that a lot,” says Johnny.

“Yeah, and you never answer – *where are*—”

“I'm getting breakfast,” he says shortly. “There's an all-night diner near the dojo.”

Daniel leans forward to try to get his attention. He waves a hand in front of his face and Johnny slaps it down without looking over. “I need to get home, man.”

“What difference does it make at this point?” asks Johnny.

Daniel collapses back in the passenger seat and folds his arms. They pass a few more streetlights blinking off as the morning turns golden around them.

“I blew all my cash last night at the Golf N' Stuff,” he mutters after a minute of silence.

He half expects Johnny to say something shitty about that, but he only shifts in his seat, blinking and squinting at the road. He taps his steering wheel and says eventually, “I can get your breakfast.”

Daniel nods, grudging.

It's weird and wrong, is what it is: sitting in a diner booth with his bully who sometimes likes to swallow his dick. It's dangerous, seeing Johnny in a context other than school or out with his friends. They're acting like two normal people who hang out all the time, and it's

really messing with Daniel's head. He keeps feeling like he needs to do something about it, drag them out of this strange pretend space they're occupying.

He drinks his soda and watches Johnny shovel soggy hashbrown into his mouth. Picks up his fork and saws into his Denver omelet, shaking his head.

Johnny notices. “What?”

“Nothing.” He chews and swallows. Squints out the window at the thickening morning traffic. “Last night, did you plan that? I mean, is that why you insisted on Ali and me coming with you guys – because you wanted to get me alone after?”

“You think a lot of yourself,” says Johnny.

“Not as much as you do, apparently.” He doesn't really mean it, mostly says it to bother the other boy, because surely nothing is worse than the idea of actually liking Daniel.

Johnny's expression doesn't change but his face reddens. “Watch it,” he warns.

Daniel eats some more of his omelet. He finishes his soda, and the waitress comes around to give him a refill. He thanks her.

“How many times have you jerked off thinking about me?” he asks, and Johnny chokes on the pork link he'd just bitten into.

Daniel watches with bright-eyed interest as he coughs and slams a fist on the table, rattling their plates and silverware. What a way to go that would be, he thinks. So many jokes to make here, or maybe just the one: *he went out doing the thing he loved, choking on a sausage.* Probably no one except Daniel would find it funny. Bit of an inside joke.

“Why the fuck are you like this?” demands Johnny across the table in a furious hiss, one he can form words. “Why can't you just be normal?”

“What would be the normal thing to do here?” asks Daniel. “Educate me, Johnny. Since you're the expert.”

“Just shut up and eat. Jesus.”

But Daniel's done eating. He's fully awake and staring down a day of serious personal crises, and he thinks he deserves something as recompense for his troubles. He watches Johnny's hands and forearms and remembers the strength of them holding Daniel down in the backseat the night before. Heat starts to pool in his groin.

Johnny goes still as Daniel sits forward in the booth. His eyes come up but get stuck halfway across the table, like he senses the change in the air and is already helpless not to follow Daniel's lead. Daniel licks his lip and opens his mouth but then he stalls out.

He can picture one version of the next ten minutes, and it's his for the taking. He'll tell Johnny he's going to the bathroom and that he should wait a minute before following him. Once inside he'll draw him into one of the stalls and get his hands on him, jerk him off slowly until he's falling apart for Daniel, and he'll make him watch it all so he can't forget who's doing it. Nobody can stop him.

Daniel sits back, deliberately relaxing the line of his body. Johnny blinks rapidly down at the table; he is slow in picking his fork back up.

“What are we going to do at school tomorrow?” asks Daniel.

Johnny frowns down at his plate like he's forgotten something. At the question, he glances up, nonplussed. “What do you mean? Nothing. You're going to stay the hell away from me.”

“Right,” he says on a bitter laugh. “Because that's what this is, me bothering you.”

Johnny raises his eyebrows and gestures with his fork, like: well, yeah.

“Okay, well – this isn't happening again,” says Daniel, flicking a finger between them. “Like, ever.”

“Yeah, no shit,” says Johnny, annoyed. “You're really ungrateful. Free fucking breakfast and this is the thanks I get?”

Daniel makes a face and throws a sugar packet at him.

Outside, afterwards, they're rounding the building back to the car

when something comes over Daniel, and nothing can stop him from saying *hey,* and when Johnny looks over, nothing can stop him from reaching out and grabbing his wrist. And nothing stops him from stepping back and back and back until they're against the wall of the diner next to the dumpsters.

Daniel rises up on his toes and folds Johnny's bottom lip carefully between his teeth. His mouth tastes of salt and the sharp orange of the Fanta he had with breakfast. He lets Daniel kiss him for a couple seconds before he abruptly shivers and crushes him against the wall, ducking his head to wreck his mouth.

Daniel needs to put a stop to this. He needs to go home and sort himself out: come up with a plan to make sure this never happens again.

But first he kisses Johnny some more.

Miyagi

That evening, he drives Mr. Miyagi out to his favorite fishing lake and he learns how to punch a person. He's already learned the form; now he learns force.

Mr. Miyagi is kitted out like a baseball catcher – it's a gratifying amount of protective gear for facing off against little ole Daniel, like the man thinks he might actually be able to inflict damage.

“Secret to punch,” says Mr. Miyagi through the cage of his catcher's mask, “make power of whole body fit inside one inch, here.” And he indicates the space between Daniel's middle and index knuckles, tapping. “Power, whole body, one inch, here.”

Daniel nods and fixes his eyes on the center of the catcher pad.

“Punch, hard,” orders Mr. Miyagi, and Daniel punches. His fist makes little impact; he feels like he's a rubber ball bouncing off a cement wall.

“What's the matter? You some kind of girl or something?” asks Mr. Miyagi.

Daniel falters. He blinks at him and falls out of his fighting stance, dropping his arm. Mr. Miyagi's gaze follows the swing of his wrist down by his side in puzzlement.

“Why'd you say that?” he demands, and he steps back. “What's that supposed to mean?”

Does Mr. Miyagi somehow know about him and Johnny, what Daniel's been getting up to the past few days? Does he think Daniel is some kind of sissy now? His stomach twists, sick. It's not like it seems, he wants to say, but that would involve knowing what it *is*.

“Standard American trash talk,” says Mr. Miyagi after a moment. He looks surprised, a little regretful, and a lot like he's displeased about feeling either emotion. “Get angry – punch hard.”

Daniel licks his lips and shifts on his feet. “But I thought the point of karate as defense was not to use it in anger.”

Mr. Miyagi considers this. “Sometime anger come anyway. Must not let anger control action.”

“So you're saying... I need to be angry, so I can learn how to punch good *despite* it?”

“Hai.”

He narrows his eyes. “Are you making this up as you go along?”

“Hai.”

Daniel grins a little, and Mr. Miyagi nods at him, gesturing for him to get back into position, which Daniel does. He thinks the man looks a little relieved.

“You know, you could've also just said sorry about the girl comment,” he says, shaking his arms out before raising them again.

“Standard American trash talk,” says Mr. Miyagi stubbornly.

“Anyone ever tell you you're a little awkward sometimes? That's okay, plenty of people are.”

He shakes his head. “Daniel-san, focus. Punch! Drive a punch – not just arm. Whole body.”

Daniel punches, and he throws his hip and leg into it like Mr. Miyagi tells him to. The motion opens up, and his body along with it: here is force flowing through him, from his center through his shoulder and arm. He becomes a conduit. He feels strong and in control and pretty damn good. A little like he feels when he has Johnny in front of him, quiet and attentive and waiting.

“Very good, Daniel-san.”

“Hey, pretty good?” he says brightly. “Look at this—” And he adds some fancy footwork into the mix, keeps throwing punches. He turns around the man, and Mr. Miyagi tries to say something, but Daniel's focus is only on the target on the catcher's pad. *Kiai!* Hey, he's actually pretty good at this punching business. *Kiai!* Practically a natural, check him out. Did Johnny pick it up this fast? *Kiai!* Watch out world —

Mr. Miyagi slips his foot behind Daniel's leg and drops him to the ground. Thumps an arm on his back while he's down there. Daniel grunts a little, complaining.

“I tell you what Miyagi think,” Mr. Miyagi says irritably as he climbs

back to his feet. “I think you dance around too much. I think you talk too much. I think you no concentrate enough. Lots of work to be done – tournament just around corner.”

This sobers Daniel right up. He thinks about how hard Mr. Miyagi has been training him, and he wonders if the man regrets making the bet about the tournament; what he'd say or think if he knew Daniel was messing around with the guy he was supposed to be fighting.

“Drive a punch, Daniel-san,” he says when Daniel has stood again.

Daniel nods and raises his fists. He looks at the target on Mr. Miyagi's chest and he pictures how it might feel to hit a person for real. Johnny won't be wearing a pad in the tournament; neither will Daniel, for that matter. When he hits Johnny, will it feel like how Daniel felt on Halloween? Or will Daniel feel like Johnny and his friends seemed – nearly breathless with anger, high on the thrill of hurting him? When he hits Johnny, will he feel as powerful and in-control as he does when he kisses him?

“Steady, concentrate. Focus power,” says Mr. Miyagi, and he nods again, but he's distracted by his thoughts. “Drive a punch.”

Daniel punches.

Sidewalk / Library / Changeover

Monday morning bright and early, he is rescued from his burgeoning moral panic by Ali needing comfort and support. It's easier not to beat himself up when he is so preoccupied being a good prospective boyfriend; he feels like less of a lie, at least.

“And then my dad tried to blame *you* for it all,” says Ali, still bristling as she related the fight with her parents to the group. “Said you were clearly a bad influence.”

Daniel has never been accused of being a bad influence before and it's hard not to feel at least a little thrilled. It's like the verbal equivalent of a leather jacket, except even better because unlike a leather jacket, this has a hope of fitting him.

“Maybe you should just let them blame me,” he says gallantly. “If it deflects their anger from you, I mean.”

She hugs her books to her chest and says righteously, “Absolutely not. It's completely patronizing. They think I'd go out with a scumbag? Do they really think so little of me?”

Scumbag is much less exciting sounding than bad influence. Daniel doesn't really want to be thought of as a scumbag.

“So you're grounded,” says Susan, checking.

Ali's shoulders fall. “Yeah,” she says, dispirited.

“For how long? My party Saturday of Thanksgiving break—”

She shakes her head. “I don't know. Probably not.”

Daniel is a little disconcerted to realize his primary reaction to the news that his potential girlfriend is grounded is one of relief. If she can't go out or see him outside of school, it gives him a little more time to get himself sorted.

Oh god, he thinks: what if I *am* a scumbag? What if her parents somehow can just tell?

“Maybe if I told them I was going with *Johnny*,” says Ali with bitter emphasis.

Daniel shifts on his feet and very deliberately does not look around at the karate dicks congregating over on the edge of the parking lot.

“Why your parents so hot for Johnny, anyway?” he asks, and if his tone is a little weird, well. That's pretty normal, extremely normal.

She sighs. “Told you, he could be—”

“Sweet, yeah,” he says hastily, not wanting to hear it again. “Right.” Honestly, he really doesn't want to know more.

Barbara, however, doesn't pick up on his tone. She volunteers, “Last March, West Valley's Academic Decathlon team made it all the way to State. We're in the van driving up to Sacramento, and Ali realizes she's left all her study notes back at home.”

Daniel's stomach sinks, but he says, “Uh huh,” because there's no stopping the rest of the story now.

“So next time we stop for gas, she calls home to ask her mom if she'll bring the notes when she comes up, because she was supposed to drive up later that evening – except Ali's dad suddenly has this big, important dinner he has to attend, so her mom *isn't* driving up anymore.”

“Uh huh,” says Daniel.

“Anyway, somehow Johnny hears about it—”

“I might've complained a little,” says Ali, embarrassed. “On the phone at the hotel that night.”

“Right, that's right! You hogged the phone for like, *forever*.”

“Oh my *god*, for the last time, you could've used the one down in the lobby—”

“So anyway,” Barbara continues brightly, “we go to bed and when we wake up the next morning, Johnny's down by the front desk! He drove up on his bike overnight, he's got Ali's notes. And he gets into this big shouting match with the concierge because he won't tell him what our room number is.”

“I had to stop him from hauling the poor man across the counter and punching his lights out,” says Ali distantly.

“It was really sweet,” says Barbara earnestly, and for some reason, this

causes Susan to look at Daniel and raise her eyebrows. She smiles around the small group, looking coolly amused about seemingly everything about it.

“Uh huh,” is all Daniel can say.

It's not like he expects school to be a walk in the park, but he was kind of hoping he could make it at least a few hours before having another fraught encounter with Johnny. He must underestimate his raw animal magnetism, however. Barely five minutes into study hall, the guy walks up behind him and grabs him by the upper arm, yanking him out of his chair with all the ease of a child plucking a dandelion in passing.

“Hey!” says Daniel, but he sort of forgets to pull away because he's so surprised.

“Oh, guys, *don't*,” says Barbara after them, but she's no help beyond that, she never is.

Johnny drags him across the library into the stacks Daniel is starting to have extremely conflicted Pavlovian reactions to, and he only lets go when Daniel furiously kicks at the back of his ankles.

“Goddamnit,” says Johnny, jumping and releasing him. He turns around and glances behind them at the rest of the library. “You know you're so fucked at the tournament? I can practically circle that shrimpy arm with my hand.”

Daniel folds his – *wiry*, actually, thank you very much – arms across his chest and leans a shoulder easily against the end of row of shelves. Tucks a foot toe-first against the floor. “Go on, talk some more about my body, I'm sure it only occupies your every waking moment.”

Johnny flushes and his mouth flattens into a angry downward slash. He begins to speak; stops; take a a big, big breath. His eyes go up to the ceiling and he grits out, “Where's my headband.”

Daniel doesn't let his expression change. “What?”

“My karate headband. I can't find it, and the last I remember seeing it was – ” and he waves a hand and crosses his arms tightly. Widens his eyes at Daniel meaningfully.

“When you were sucking me off in my apartment,” supplies Daniel. He can't help himself, and he's beginning to think it might be a problem. Johnny looks furious; unfortunately, this only makes it better for him. He says airily, “Well, I don't know what to tell you, man. I haven't seen it.”

“Bullshit.”

“What, you think I'm lying?” Daniel narrows his eyes, cocks his head. “Why would I lie?”

The night before, very late: Daniel took the headband from where he'd tucked it away in his sock drawer. He wrapped the length of black cloth around his hand and stretched out on top of his bed, back and head tucked up against a pillow set along the wall. He pumped a generous glob of lotion into his free hand and slicked up his dick. Then he folded the headband-wrapped hand around himself and slowly pumped away, and to be frank, he doesn't see why he should be forced to think about this right now or ever again.

In his distraction, he fails to properly understand how agitated Johnny is by the loss of his headband. The shove comes as a complete shock; his back swings and bangs like a screen door against the row of shelves, almost rocking them. Daniel stares up at him, eyes flown wide.

Johnny steps in close, and he's not ogling Daniel now. He's not turned on. He's just furious.

“You don't get to have that,” he says tightly. “The other bullshit, that's – whatever. It doesn't matter. But karate is mine. Don't ever think I'm going to go easy on you just because sometimes I like to,” and he stops, breathing hard through his nose. His nostrils are rimmed white. “I want it back,” he finishes tightly.

“I don't have it,” says Daniel, mouth dry. “I haven't seen it.”

“*Bullshit,*” says Johnny again.

Daniel doesn't like being called a liar. There's no reason for Johnny to think he would lie, after all. How dare he? He puts his chin up, challenging. “Look, if you're so goddamn sure, you're welcome to come by my place and search the living room.”

Johnny nods and steps in close. “Yeah, you'd like that, wouldn't you.”

“Not nearly as much as you would.” But for the first time, Daniel is unsure of it. He's still in control here, isn't he? Why doesn't it feel the same way as before?

Johnny steps back, glancing down the row at the library. Whatever he sees makes his expression go carefully blank. His eyes flick back to Daniel, who is watching him closely.

“I'm going to come by after karate tonight,” he says, “and you better have my headband. Or else.” And then he turns away, like that's something he gets to just *do*.

Daniel takes this in, seething. He lets him get a couple feet away before saying, “Or else what?”

But Johnny doesn't take the bait. He just walks away.

Ostracism / Gym / Detention

As the day progresses following the encounter in study hall, certain matters become clear to Daniel and they are simply outrageous: Johnny starts ignoring him.

In history, every time Daniel glances over his shoulder, Johnny is gazing across the room out the window. In the hallway his eyes don't even skip on Daniel; they flow over him like he's not even big enough to interrupt the stream. Months of this guy staring at him, bugging him, pushing him around and now he has, what – better things to occupy his time? Bullshit.

And Daniel's no fool, he knows Johnny is just putting on an act. But since when does he even have the ability? If he can lie like this, how is Daniel supposed to tell when he's telling the truth?

He goes out of his way to use his locker before lunch, and Johnny is hanging out in front of his own, scattering crumpled balls of paper and snapped pencils all over the floor as he digs through its depths.

“Looking for something?” says Daniel blithely as he reaches for his combination lock. “Hey, maybe your stupid headband's in there.”

But Johnny only slams the locker shut and turns on his heel, walks away without saying a word. Daniel stares after him and inwardly seethes. What the hell is this?

“Are you okay?” asks Ali at lunch. She follows Daniel's gaze to the Cobras across the cafeteria. “Oh no, what'd he do now?”

“Nothing,” says Daniel, looking down at his tray. He hunches his shoulders and stabs his spoon through the thin foil his cup of applesauce. “He did nothing.”

It's like the world has turned upside down. Johnny isn't supposed to be able to ignore him – Daniel is supposed to ignore Johnny. That's how their relationship works: Johnny stares and blushes and pesters and Daniel gracefully rises above the flames of his frenzy like a magnificent phoenix, and that's how everyone knows who the good guy is here.

Maybe he should drag him into another bathroom, he thinks as he changes for gym class. Surely Johnny won't be able to ignore him once

he's down on his knees on the cold, hard tile. Except – god, what if he *tried*? What if Daniel stood before him with his dick hanging out the front of his pants like a spicy fat salami, and Johnny turned his nose up at it? His dick might never recover from the mortification. No, it's too great a risk. He needs to find a safer way to put Johnny in his place.

“How do you feel about playing soccer today?” he asks Allen, who blanches.

Outside, he steps up to where the girls are sitting around pretending to stretch and puts his hands on his hips. “Friends and peers, we're playing the guys in soccer today.”

“What?” says Ali.

“No,” says Susan.

“Why?” says Barbara.

“We just need a fifth player for our team,” he says, squinting around the field. “I thought I had one, but he had a panic attack and had to go to the nurse's office. Do you think Lisa Halliway would play with us?”

“Lisa Halliway hates you,” says Susan flatly. “She heard you made fun of her nose.”

“But why are we playing soccer?” persists Barbara. “What happened to protesting gym, can't we go back to that? That was fun.”

“We're playing soccer, because I overheard Johnny and his friends in the locker room, talking about how easily they could beat you guys,” he explains.

“No, that doesn't sound real,” Susan says to Ali, who shakes her head. “That conversation definitely didn't happen.”

Daniel perseveres. “And you can't let that stand, right? Equal rights and stuff. Susan B. Anthony would want you to do this.”

“Daniel, I don't know what's going on with you,” says Ali. “But we really don't want to play soccer. Half the time those games end up in a stupid fight.”

“Nonsense!” he cries. “This is going to be good, clean fun.”

“You kicked Bobby in the groin last week,” says Susan.

“That was an accident,” he says, pointing at her a little forcefully. “I was going for a cool bicycle kick, and he stepped into it.”

But it's a losing battle. Why does no one except Johnny do what he tells them to? And now maybe even Johnny won't.

Daniel retires from the field beaten without ever even holding his sword aloft. He flops down on the grass and tucks his chin into his palm, glaring resentfully over where Johnny is jogging across the field: his hair flopping and glinting in the sunlight, his bare shoulder blades flexing as he pumps his strong arms. Fuck him.

“Oh, *Daniel*,” says Barbara, coaxing.

“Please don't pout,” says Susan. “It makes me embarrassed to know you. Are you seriously still attracted to this guy?” she asks Ali. “I mean, look at this.”

“She can't resist my sparkling charm and good manners,” says Daniel without looking over.

“Yeah, I'm feeling uncontrollably attracted to all that right now,” says Ali, and her tone makes him finally stir and snap out of his funk. He quickly turns to talk to her properly and perform some damage control.

It would be just *perfect* if Johnny ignoring him somehow also led to Ali deciding not to date him on the same day: the whole world deciding all at once that Daniel LaRusso is undesirable.

“Sure am thrilled to be invited to play with you guys,” says Daniel as he takes his third trick and makes good on his bet. The hooligans all groan and throw their cards down. “Would you believe it, I've never played Dirty Clubs before. First time!”

He doesn't look over to where Johnny is sitting face down in his desk. He doesn't need the attention – he's making friends here.

“Just shut up and deal,” says Frankie.

Frankie's got a pierced ear and a ring through his nose, and when

Daniel gets to know him a little better, he is absolutely planning on asking him if he doesn't think that might be a liability in a fight. Hoop through the nose, surely it just makes people want to pull it. Daniel's thought about it four times already. It's extremely distracting. The hoop looks strong, perfectly sized for someone's fingers. He could just reach over and. Tug.

Daniel sits up straighter in his seat and shuffles the cards. He offers the deck to Rock for cutting; Rock obliges.

“So,” he says, cheerfully conspiratorial. He starts flipping cards out in front of the guys. “What are you guys in for?”

Bug leans forward to collect his cards in a heavy creak of leather, and an even louder creak of the desk beneath his body. He's built like a mountainside, and not even the Appalachians – fully the Sierra Nevada of big guys over here. His hand could probably encircle Johnny's bicep, and who's the small guy now, Johnny?

“We got caught trying to set Mr. Alpert's car on fire,” says Bug.

Daniel freezes, his smile going fixed. “Oh!” He blinks down at his cards; he's got three trump cards and the left bauer. Nice, that's nice. “So uh, they just gave you detention for that?” he ventures, shifting the cards in his hand. “That's um,” disturbingly lenient. No wonder the valley is such a nightmare. Pure anarchy. What's Reagan's plan for this?

“Such a drag, right?” says Rock. “Complete bullshit.”

“I bet two,” says Bug.

“Two,” says Frankie.

Rock knocks his knuckles on the desk, and Daniel bets four. They all groan, but hey, he's got the cards, he going to play 'em.

“This is a lot of fun,” says Daniel. “We should make this a regular thing.”

Across the room, Johnny picks his head up a few inches and lets it drop down on the desk with an audible *thud*. He repeats the motion a couple times.

It's so sad when animals in zoos get depressed; maybe if he wasn't such an obvious prep, the hooligans would have invited him to join

their game. This is what you get from life when you're not open to the world and you spend your days ignoring people – you end up alone and bored and giving yourself a slight concussion. Serves him right, thinks Daniel.

After bidding farewell to his newfound hooligan friends, Daniel walks down the empty hallway towards the doors on the eastern end of the building, where his bike is parked. He is whistling and generally feeling much more chipper than he has all day, and maybe this is why he doesn't hear the rapid footsteps coming up behind him.

“What the,” he yelps, as Johnny gets a hand around his wrist and yanks him sideways into an empty classroom. He doesn't get to continue the inquiry, because Johnny kisses him like one or both of them might be dying.

He pulls Daniel in tight, dragging his hands down his body, squeezing his ass and manhandling him onto one of the desks near the door, and Daniel responds by burying his hands in Johnny's hair and sticking his tongue in his mouth. And just like that, the world makes sense again.

“You're the most,” and Johnny presses sucking sore kisses down his neck, “ridiculous fucking—”

“*Me*? I'm not the weirdo who suddenly wants to pretend like I don't *exist*.”

Johnny draws back and stares down at him with wild eyes. It's a lot less gratifying than the kissing.

“We're supposed to ignore each other,” he says in a furious whisper-shout. “That's what you said last week!”

“Well – okay, yeah. But you didn't have be so good at it,” says Daniel, and Johnny looks like he's about to kill him. Daniel kicks his legs over the side of the desk and wonders how far he can push the moment. The other boy practically ran after him, after all. Dragged him in here. He's clearly desperate for it.

“I have to get to karate,” says Johnny, shaking his head and stepping back, and hey, wait.

He hops off the desk and plasters himself to Johnny's back just as he

reaches the door. Johnny goes still, hand frozen on the knob.

Daniel presses a hand against his chest and drags it down the firm length of his torso, fingers bumping over his waistband. He cups him through his chinos. Nuzzles his spine. Johnny begins to shake in his arms.

“You're coming over later, though, right,” says Daniel, and it's not a question.

“For my headband,” says Johnny.

“For your headband, right." He presses a kiss to the back of his neck and adds a hint of teeth. "That's right.”

He releases him and steps back. Johnny moves like a man sleepwalking as he pulls open the door. He doesn't look back at Daniel, but that's alright; Daniel is pretty sure he knows what the other boy will be seeing every step on the way out of school.

Pickle / Denial / Flaw

Once he's gotten away from school and Johnny's general stupefying funk and also done some karate, Daniel comes to his senses enough to realize he's in big trouble. After all, he started the day out intending to avoid Johnny completely and seems to be ending it having scheduled another appointment for a blow job. How did this happen? It doesn't bode well for the future.

And, sure, he could always grab the headband where it's currently slung over the bathroom shower rod and shove it at Johnny's chest the moment he shows up, tell him to go away. And Johnny might actually go away, because he got what he came for. But Daniel knows he is not going to do this. He's not going to give the headband back, and he's not going to tell Johnny to go away. He's going to tell him to come inside, and then he's going to tell him a whole bunch of other stuff, probably, and Johnny's going to listen to all of it, or he better, and anyway, they are in a real pickle here, aren't they.

Daniel leans forward on his forearms over the kitchen counter and chews through his dinner, frowning in thought. Maybe he should draw up an outline, try to figure this all out. But where to start? What he wants?

He wants to stop being the kind of person who wants Johnny Lawrence on his knees sucking his dick all the time. Oh, that's perfect: a clear articulation of an impossible goal. Great start, Daniel.

Okay, so he can't control what he wants but he *can*, theoretically, control what he does. So, trying again: he wants to stop letting Johnny Lawrence suck his dick.

Except no, he doesn't; Johnny really loves sucking his dick, and it feels unkind to keep it from him. And it's sort of the only thing that has kept the peace at school, the tournament truce notwithstanding. If Daniel gets all stern and tells him like, *no more dick for you,* Johnny might go back to trying to beat him up. And then Daniel will have to defend himself and that will just get Johnny hot and bothered again, and they'll end up right back where they started. There is no retreating into Plato's Cave here; Johnny knows a higher truth now and that truth is Daniel's dick.

Maybe he should try to approach this differently? Start with what he doesn't want.

He doesn't want to hurt Ali. That one is pretty clear. No addendums or caveats there. And what might hurt Ali? Finding out he is running around behind her back, demanding orgasms from her closeted ex-boyfriend.

And it's not like this whole thing is going to go anywhere *productive*. Temporary pleasure isn't worth throwing away a good prospect for an actual relationship with someone he respects and admires, someone he can be happy with – someone who actually likes him. So what he needs to do is: turn Johnny away from his door; stop kissing him in strange places; fight at the tournament in a few weeks; vanquish his enemies and get the girl, live happily ever after or at least until prom in the spring.

Except why the hell does none of that sound very appealing?

Daniel jumps, startled, as the apartment door opens and Johnny walks in. He straightens up from the counter, spreading his hands.

“Whoa, whoa, what the hell, man? Ever hear of knocking?”

“I don't know, did *you*?” says Johnny, and he jerks his thumb over his shoulder. “I knocked for like a solid minute, standing out there feeling like an idiot.”

“Oh,” says Daniel, and then he doesn't know else to say. He's unsettled; he's unprepared. He doesn't know what happened to his whole evening.

Johnny shoves his hands into his jacket pockets. “So where's my headband?”

Daniel rolls his eyes and abandons his uneaten dinner, walking around the counter. “I told you, I haven't seen it.”

“*Bullshit*, you took it off me last Friday, and that's the last time I saw it. It has to be here.”

“Well, maybe my mom found it on the floor and threw it away, I don't know.”

He isn't prepared for how hard Johnny's expression falls. The guy actually turns in place, looking around the room and scanning the floor with his eyes. He looks five seconds from dropping to his hands and knees to actually check under the couch, and it's not like Daniel wouldn't find the position interesting, but he'd prefer it if the guy

wasn't moping the whole time.

Time to distract him.

Daniel approaches and stops a foot away, bracing his hands on his hips. He looks Johnny over and takes his time with it, giving his undivided attention to all the little details: the rumple of his chinos after a long day, the sharp line of his upturned jacket collar framing his jaw. The darkness of his hair, still a little sweat-damp from karate.

He can smell him already, and he kind of wants to roll around in it, maybe do something insane like chew on the ends of his hair. Get a hand in that collar and stick his face into the crease of Johnny's neck: put tongue to skin and see if he's right about the sweat, that Johnny didn't take a shower before coming over here. There's something about that. Johnny in that terrible place he thinks of as so special, slipping out of his white training gi and rushing over to Daniel still wet and flushed from the exertion.

Yeah, something about that, thinks Daniel. A blurring of some kind of boundary, maybe. Johnny worked up that sweat at his dojo but he came here to give it to Daniel.

Johnny has gone very still. His eyes are unfocused, stuck somewhere around Daniel's chin. He doesn't move as Daniel drifts closer.

“What do you want, Johnny?”

His head shakes slightly. “What do you mean?”

“I mean,” what *does* he mean? He takes a close turn around the other boy, and Johnny keeps his eyes front like a good little soldier. This bugs Daniel; this isn't his stupid dojo. “When you come here, or when it's just the two of us like, like this. Where do you go in your head?”

Johnny's brow knits and he blinks, slow.

“Why are you doing all this,” he asks him, a little impatient. Because if he doesn't know the answer maybe Johnny does. “What do you *want*?”

“I don't want anything,” says Johnny.

His face twists. “Bullshit, man.” He'd kind of thought Johnny was past this type of denial.

But Johnny shakes his head, expression quiet. “I want to want nothing. And, and then I do, when – ” and he doesn't finish the thought.

“That's what you feel when you're sucking me off, nothing?”

“No, not like – it's. Empty, but – but clean too,” says Johnny and he reddens, expression flinching minutely. “Why do we have to talk about it?”

“Because maybe I want to talk about it,” says Daniel, and he finally touches him: just a light hand on his wrist beneath the cuff of his jacket. “Are you saying no?” Johnny doesn't respond. He asks curiously, “What would you do, if I *told* you to talk about it?”

Johnny's pale lashes sweep down over his eyes, and his lips part. Daniel presses the point by leaning into him. Their chests brush. He slides his hand around the back of Johnny's and guides it over so the other boy is touching himself through his pants.

“What if I told you to describe how this feels for me?” he asks, a little breathless.

“I can't,” says Johnny, and his hand tightens around himself, almost punishing.

“Can't or won't?” he counters, demanding.

“*Please*,” he says, and his voice cracks down the middle, and it's so good; Daniel feels like he should be able to just step right inside him, make himself at home. And Johnny would let him, he'd welcome it. Maybe that's what he meant when he said empty.

Daniel's mouth drops open. His head falls back a little as he squeezes his hand around Johnny's, making him massage himself. He rubs his fingers along the hot skin between Johnny's fingers, the only soft part of his hands.

“It's okay,” he says, and when Johnny shudders, he loses his mind. “That's okay, I won't do it. It's fine, you're good. You're doing so good.”

He makes himself let go and step back, eyes running greedily over the portrait before him. Johnny stays still, holding himself. Waiting. The lines of him should be etched in marble, Daniel thinks: preserved so someone else in some other time might be able to appreciate it and

know he existed once, exactly like this.

The thought comes to Daniel, very clear and tinged with a heavy certainty: he isn't going to stop seeing Johnny like this. He's going to take everything he can get, whatever he can get. Later tonight, he'll probably be pretty upset about it, this fatal flaw of desire. But later he won't have Johnny waiting on him.

“Come here,” he says, and he steps backwards towards his bedroom.

Place / Body / Ready

Strip, says Daniel, and he gets to sit in the center of his bed and watch that body bare itself for him. There is a curiously unquestioning aspect to Johnny's expression as he obeys – guy knows he's fit, after all. The way he holds himself is not entirely dissimilar from how he'd stood next to his sensei at the dojo back at the start of the month. It's like he's saying, *here is my place; here is my body; and now I'm ready.*

Daniel has seen plenty of Johnny, but not all at once, and not like this – presented to him, angled for admiration and offered for touch. He finds himself looking at the oddest things. The pinch point where his torso becomes his hips, normally obscured by a waistband. The smooth baldness of his ankles where his pale leg hair just stops. Even his hands, although there is nothing different or new about them, and Daniel has perhaps seen them more than any other part of Johnny. But they look different as part of the complete picture.

Johnny is hard already, but he isn't doing anything about it. That seems a shame, so Daniel tells him to touch himself. He tells him to go slow.

And he thinks maybe only Johnny Lawrence could get away with standing around dick in hand and not look kinda stupid. The other boy bows his head and bites his bottom lip. He jerks off like he's concentrating really hard, and Daniel wonders what he's thinking about; so then he asks him, what are you thinking about when you do that?

Nothing, says Johnny. I try not to think about anything.

Daniel doesn't like that, so he says to him, do you want me to tell you what to think about? And he watches Johnny's hand fumble around his dick. Takes that as a yes.

So the question becomes, what does Daniel *want* Johnny to think about? He could say anything. World peace, think about world peace. No, that wouldn't be fair. If Johnny's going to actually listen to him, then he should be careful about what he says. Feels like there's an unspoken pact here.

Daniel rises up on his knees on the mattress and shifts to the edge of it. He's still completely clothed, and he's not really in the mood to do much about that, but maybe Johnny could have a little – a little of

whatever Daniel's got, and he never really thought he had much but here they are.

He brings his hand up to the top button of his plaid and slides it through its hole and he says, think about us in the library at school. Any day now, if I wanted to, I could drag you to the back stacks and kiss you. And any moment people might glance over, and they might see – what would they see, Johnny? You letting me do it. You enjoying it.

He unbuttons two more buttons and watches Johnny's eyes zero in on this small glimpse of his chest. His tongue appears between his teeth, and his hand starts to quicken.

I said go slow, says Daniel, and Johnny breathes out hard, squeezing his eyes shut briefly. He swallows and nods and adjusts his pace.

Have you messed around with guys before? he asks him, curious. He doesn't know what answer he's hoping for, and when Johnny nods tightly and shrugs and says something about a bar he knew of, he doesn't know how to feel.

He unbuttons the rest of his shirt but leaves it on; he beckons and Johnny steps forward to the edge of the bed, still pulling on his dick. Daniel looks down the length of his torso at that moving hand. His own dick is hard in his jeans, and he hasn't decided what he wants to do about it.

If I told you to meet me in the bathroom off the shop class hallway every day before sixth period, would you do it? Daniel asks him. Yes, says Johnny.

If I told you to blow me, would you do that? Daniel asks him. Yes, says Johnny and his hands moves more quickly but Daniel decides to cut him some slack and not mention it.

And if I told you I didn't want you to jerk off for the rest of the day, or the next morning – if I told you you didn't get to touch yourself unless I was with you, would you do that? *Yes*, says Johnny and somehow from the sound of his voice, Daniel can tell he's close.

He reaches out and cups Johnny's hip with one hand and the back of his neck with the other, and it's almost like he's embracing him. It's a little weird, but it works. Johnny makes a soft sound and hangs his head and comes, and Daniel feels it smear between their stomachs, hot and sticky. He moves his hand around to Johnny's face and turns it so

he can kiss him softly, and he can feel the way Johnny's skin warms after. Like coming on Daniel's stomach is one thing but taking his kiss is too much.

Johnny breaks away from the kiss by dropping to his knees, his lips already opening so he can mouth hungrily over the mess on Daniel's bare stomach.

Daniel sits back on his heels and drags a hand through Johnny's flopping blond fringe, and he lets him work. When he's done cleaning him, Johnny reaches up to undo his fly and take out his dick, and Daniel lets him do that too. He waits until he's started jerking and licking him, and then he sucks in a deep breath and clasps the back of Johnny's neck.

If you beat me in the tournament, are you still going to want to do this? asks Daniel.

Johnny takes his mouth away and blinks up at him, confused.

“I am going to beat you,” he says, clear-eyed with his belief. “That's not even a question.”

But Daniel's not interested in arguing about that. “Will you still want this?” he asks again.

Johnny rubs his cheek absently along his hip. “I didn't think I wanted it a month ago but then you turned out to be a little freak.”

His hand tightens on the back of Johnny's neck, and he doesn't know why he can't stop talking, but he can't stop talking. His heart is racing, and he doesn't think it has anything to do with the blow job.

“But do you think we'll ever – I don't know, hang out?” asks Daniel. “After the tournament, I mean. Like Barbara was saying the other night.”

“Why would we?” Johnny frowns. “It's not like we're friends.”

And Johnny turns his attention back to Daniel's dick, taking it deep and leaving Daniel suddenly airless and adrift above.

Bed / Together / Alone

Eventually Johnny stirs and lifts his head from Daniel's thigh. He grimaces, glancing down at the mess on his own stomach.

“Where's your bathroom?” he asks.

Daniel lets his fingers slide out of his hair and gestures vaguely at the door, mind preoccupied with the strange heaviness that has lingered since he came down Johnny's throat. “To the left.”

Then, as Johnny springs easily to his feet, Daniel remembers what's in the bathroom. He sits bolt upright. “Wait!”

Johnny pauses and glances at him, puzzled. And no one that naked should look so calm and confident, it's just not natural. Like, he's not even trying to hide his dick.

Daniel puts his hands up and scoots off the bed. “You stay here. I'll get you a wash cloth. I'm the host, right? Only polite, if I get you a wash cloth. Lie down, man. Take a load off.”

His brow pinches but thankfully remains mostly unclouded with suspicion. “...Okay?”

Daniel smiles brightly. “Great.” And he shoves him down on the bed; Johnny folds like a Jacob's ladder toy. He stares after him as he leaves the room.

In the bathroom, Daniel swiftly yanks the now-dry headband off the shower rod and shoves it away into the back pocket of his jeans. He breathes out in relief.

The boy in the bathroom mirror looks like he's in trouble. There's nothing really physical to point to – he's a little flushed, sure, but other than that he appears pretty put-together. He's barely even broken a sweat; he's not the one hanging out naked on someone else's bed with his own load all over his belly. Why does he feel so weird?

Daniel takes off his shirt and splashes some water on his face and neck. He grabs a small towel and runs it under a warm faucet, and turns back to his bedroom without looking again at the mirror.

In his room, Johnny is stretched out over his bed with a crooked arm behind his head, one foot flat on the bed, his knee swaying a little

restlessly through the air. When Daniel reappears, he flicks a look over at him, and he looks wary.

And just like that, Daniel is again confronted with the physical reality of him. There is a boy in his bed. Daniel put him there. Daniel touched him and looked at him and thought: I like this, I want this.

He could just toss the towel at him, and he thinks even a day ago he might've – it would land with a satisfying *splat* and Johnny would make a face, and then he'd probably do something shitty like drop the used towel on Daniel's carpet afterwards. Get dressed and leave and go pretend none of this has happened.

Instead, Daniel says, “Here.” And he climbs onto the end of his bed and crawls up over Johnny's recumbent body until he's straddling his thighs. He cleans his stomach with a few careful, firm wipes.

Johnny doesn't seem to know where to look. His eyes run over Daniel's chest and shoulders; he watches his arms.

Daniel pauses and looks down. “You want to take care of that?” He doesn't think he could ever get tired of watching the pink spread across Johnny's face.

“No,” he mutters, turning his head and looking away. “I should go.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay.” But then Daniel tosses the towel on the floor and leans up over him. Johnny's breath hitches as their chests press together, and Daniel carefully takes his mouth before he can adjust.

Johnny's free arm wraps around his back, hand hungrily roving like he wants to touch all of him at once. He reaches down and grabs Daniel's ass without hesitation or any gentleness, and Daniel surges over him, his denim-clad thigh pressing down against Johnny's hard dick.

Then Johnny's hand freezes. Daniel feels him palm his ass again, this time more interrogative than intoxicated. His fingers dip into his back pocket, and Daniel suppresses a sigh as the crumpled length of black cloth is pulled out into the world like a silk handkerchief emerging from a magician's hand.

He decides to cut his losses.

“Yeah, found that with the towels,” he says, sitting up. “Guess my mom must've tossed it in the laundry or something.”

Johnny's hand fists around the headband, and his eyes move between it and Daniel, unsure and half-questioning. “Okay,” he says slowly. “Good.”

And he's still hard, but Daniel's abruptly not in the mood. He climbs off Johnny and bends to grab the damp towel from his floor. “Anyway, you should go. My mom's going to be home soon.”

Johnny is slow in sitting up and swinging his legs off the bed. He looks a little confused, and for some reason, this annoys Daniel, even though he is largely also confused.

“So do you,” says Johnny, and he's doing that thing again where he doesn't meet Daniel's eyes, and his shoulders are held soft and receptive and his voice sounds like one endless *please*. “Do you want me to keep ignoring you at school or not?”

Daniel looks at him for a long moment, tossing the face cloth between his hands. It smells like damp and jizz and it's distracting. Also distracting: the length of black standing out stark against Johnny's pale skin, transforming his hand back into a weapon.

“Do what you want,” says Daniel, and he turns away.

That night, he has trouble falling asleep. He stretches out on his bed where Johnny had sprawled a few hours previous, and he tries to think again about what he wants, and what he doesn't want.

What does it mean for someone to only want him halfway? Does the desire become a lie of sorts, one they're both choosing to make over and over? But how can it be a lie when it feels more real than anything else in the world while he's in the middle of it?

Maybe he needs to just gather more intel, go on a fact-finding mission. If he just knows Johnny more, he can figure out what to do with him, and whether any of this is worth the trouble.

Duck / Duck / Goose

He wakes up with a renewed determination and belief that he can conquer the world, or at least the valley, or at least a tiny, highly specific subset of the west valley's social scene. He hasn't spent the past several weeks learning to face things head-on for nothing, after all.

In study hall, he pulls out his customary chair besides Barbara and sits. He takes out his Physics work and flips his pencil through his fingers casually as he waits for Johnny to pass them on his way to his usual nap spot across the library.

“Hey Johnny,” he says, when this eventuality occurs.

Johnny actually jumps and looks around. He's wearing a dark navy sweater and pressed grey trousers, the perfect picture of a well-heeled dick who Daniel happens to know has a nice dick.

At his side, Barbara whispers, *oh my god, what.* Daniel gives no sign he's heard her and says pleasantly, “You should sit over here. Study with us.” Johnny pinks up, eyes darting. Too late, Daniel realizes he has worded this all wrong: as a command instead of a friendly invitation. He adds hastily, “I mean, if you like,” but it's too late, it sounds like he's making the guy an offer he can't refuse. Accidental mafioso over here.

“Um. Yeah, sure – why don't you join us, Johnny?” asks Barbara gamely.

Johnny hesitates, blinking quickly. But then, slowly, his hand drops to the back of the chair across from Daniel, and he pulls it out. He sits down. He looks down at the table like he has never seen one before, and then his head turns slightly like he wants to cast a longing look over his shoulder at his usual seat. He's not even that big of a guy, but for some reason he looks too large for the moment.

“Do... you have any homework to work on?” asks Barbara helpfully, after a few seconds have passed and he hasn't moved to take out a book or anything else.

Daniel chews on the end of his pencil in light agitation. Johnny looks at him, and he widens his eyes and shrugs. Johnny looks at Barbara and says:

“I don't know.” He seems to think about it. “No?”

“Oh.” She gives a polite laugh. “Well, lucky you.” She casts Daniel a speaking look and turns her attention down towards her own textbook.

Johnny's wearing the headband. Daniel gets nothing done that study hall.

“How about we sit with the guys over yonder today?” Daniel asks Ali and Barbara at lunch.

Ali grips her tray and looks up at him in confusion. “You want to go sit with my jerk of an ex and his awful friends? The ones who gave you that black eye just last week?”

From this perspective, it does sound somewhat foolhardy. “I'm trying to build bridges here,” he explains. “Right now it's just – back and forth, back and forth. One day we're fine, the next they're jumping me in the gym.”

“All the more reason to avoid them,” she says.

“And they get so rowdy when they're hungry,” Barbara puts in. “I mean, why do you think we don't sit with them at lunch in the first place?”

Daniel looks across the cafeteria to where Dutch and Bobby appear to be having an arm-wrestling contest with Tommy sitting in avid adjudication. He wrinkles his nose a little. God, they're *so*—

“They have to be trainable,” he says, a little weakly. “I mean, they're all housebroken, aren't they?” Well, he isn't sure about Dutch; pretty sure he saw him piss on Vice Principal Frazer's car once.

“What an amazing basis for a friendship,” says Ali, and her tone makes him put his back to the boys and focus on her. She searches his face and adds, a little lost, “I feel like you were smarter at the start of the semester – is this my fault? I kept pushing you to face your problems, and now you can't let it go?”

“This is me trying to do that,” he insists. Her lips thin and she shakes her head. “Ali, I'm trying to find a path forward here. The school year

doesn't end with that damn tournament, I have *months* left in this place."

Her shoulders slump, signaling defeat. Barbara nudges her side in sympathy, and Ali exchanges a weary look with her before saying, "Okay. Fine. Let's go make... friends."

Jimmy is the first to notice them, and his expression does not instill Daniel with much confidence. But it is precisely situations like this that were meant for the *fake it 'til you make it* attitude.

Johnny stares up at him like someone who just got a draft notice for 'Nam. "What do you want," he says, and Daniel can't really read his tone, but he thinks it sounds bad.

"We thought we'd sit over here today," he says, and he sets his tray down on the table. Beside him, Ali and Barbara slowly do the same and step through the bench. Daniel sits and realizes he's forgotten himself again – he worded that like a statement and not a request. He says belatedly, "I mean, if that's alright?" And he looks earnestly at Johnny, just to make sure the other boy doesn't read this like some kind of veiled threat.

Johnny hides his mouth with his fist; his eyes crawl sideways to his friends. His ears are very red.

"Of course it's not alright," says Dutch, staring down the line of boys at him. "Did that old man drop you on your head during training?" But then Bobby pins his arm to the table, and Dutch is distracted. He starts swearing and struggling, but it's too late.

When no one else says anything, Daniel turns his attention to his food tray. He tries to ignore Johnny glaring from across the table. It's really hard. Thankfully some familiar figures pass along behind Johnny a minute later.

Daniel smiles wide and calls out, "Frankie, Bug! Hey, how're you doing? I didn't know you guys had second lunch."

"Hey Dan," says Bug, and he reaches over the table between Johnny and Tommy to bump his fist. No one has ever bumped Daniel's fist before; it might be the greatest moment of his life.

Tommy stares at the thick leather-clad arm now bisecting the table. He follows the length of it up to its owner, and then his wide eyes swing over to Daniel. Johnny, meanwhile, seems to be grinding his

teeth down into tiny bone fragments. He takes a large bite of his apple like he wishes he was pulling a grenade pin.

“How was your ma's appointment, Frankie?” asks Daniel.

He shrugs. “Said they had to run a few more tests.” He notices Jimmy staring up at him and scowls. “What you looking at, pretty boy?” he demands, looming. Jimmy shakes his head and stammers. Meanwhile, Daniel says knowingly over his panicked *nothing*s:

“Yeah, a few more tests for a few more hundred, right?”

Frankie glances back up at him, mouth twisting bitterly. “You know it.” He and Bug nod at him; Daniel gives a cheerful *see ya*, and they continue on their way.

Daniel pretends not to notice the Cobras' staring. He picks up his cup of applesauce and peels back the foil. He glances to his right, where Ali and Barbara are also staring at him.

“Bridges,” he explains.

“*No*,” snaps Johnny in gym class, before Daniel can say anything. He shoves the soccer ball beneath his arm and sets his legs aggressively like he might block his entry onto the field.

“No *what*?” says Daniel, protesting. The girls stand to the side and watch them with something like resignation.

“You can't play with us.”

“I thought you wanted me to play with you guys – you've always press-ganged me into it before. What's changed?”

Johnny's eyes flash a warning beneath the black of his headband. “What's changed is that you're a sore loser, and we don't want to play with you. So that's that. Just accept it and leave us alone.”

“Also you're kind of a ball hog,” says Tommy.

“You kicked me in the dick last week,” says Bobby. “And sent a ball at my head before that.”

“Okay, you and me – we got off on the wrong foot,” Daniel tells him,

clinging to a conciliatory tone with all he's got. It's hard, because Johnny is still fuming in his direction, and jeez.

What the hell. It's just gym class soccer. He starts to feel a little embarrassed at this hard-line exclusion, and it doesn't help his temper any; he doesn't understand why Johnny is acting like this. Would it really be so bad, them seeing each other outside of a sex or attempted-murder capacity?

“Daniel, c'mon,” says Ali.

“Yeah, if you guys aren't going to fight, then this is going to get boring fast,” adds Susan.

“It doesn't have to be a fight,” says Daniel, locking eyes with Johnny.

“Sounds like something a coward would say,” says Johnny, and Daniel sets his teeth, nodding. Okay. Right.

“You ever think maybe there's something more to life than this bullshit tough guy persona you got going on?” he demands, stepping in close. He ignores the girls murmuring his name in warning, and he ignores the way Johnny's jaw has gone tight like it gets when he's really angry. It's like he can't stop himself, because, “I see right through you,” except he *doesn't*, actually. And the idea there might not actually be anything *to* see is driving him crazy. He just wants to know, he just wants an answer here. “So go ahead, keep walking around this school like some kind of big shot, but someday it's all gonna come crashing down on your head, and everyone, I mean *everyone* is gonna see—”

Johnny backhands him.

Gym / Changing / Never - Again

The hit is swift and devastating in its casual dismissal. Johnny hadn't held back. The ground rushes up to meet Daniel before he even understands what has happened.

He grunts softly against the grass, and tests his jaw.

Above him, behind him – Ali screams at Johnny, and she's not holding back either: *what the hell is wrong with you* and *why do you always have to*— and Johnny shouts back *I didn't start it!*

Daniel rolls over and pushes up to his elbows, and Ali balls her hands into fists and punches Johnny across the mouth.

Daniel's eyes shoot wide and he scrambles up to help separate the two, because he doesn't – suddenly he isn't sure Johnny wouldn't hit a girl. He doesn't know the line or what rules exist in that guy's head. Maybe there's just the one: get hit, hit back.

Johnny holds his mouth and Susan and Barbara pull at Ali's elbows to drag her away, and some of the Cobras shout at the girls, get her outta here, jesus christ, what's wrong with her, she on the rag or what?

Daniel quickly puts himself between the two, and gets his hands out to forestall Johnny from doing anything. He's breathing hard, adrenaline coursing through his body. He can feel something heavy on his lip: swelling.

Johnny looks at him, hand still at his mouth. He looks confused as he takes in Daniel's stance. His eyes shift from him to Ali over his shoulder, and he goes pale.

“I wouldn't hit *her*,” he hisses.

Daniel stares into his furious blue eyes. He thinks about the first time he met Johnny, the ugly scene on the beach. He thinks about Ali and Johnny's voices overlapping and entwining, sharp and strident. The decibels of the fight soaring to the sky. There used to be couples now and then who lived in his apartment building, you could hear them through the walls. Everyone knows the sound of it, when someone's living in a fight that never really ends, just pauses.

Daniel says quietly, “I don't believe you.”

Johnny stares.

A whistle blows shrilly, heralding the late, useless arrival of the substitute gym teacher who has been carefully avoiding them all for the past three weeks.

“This group, again,” he says, a little out of breath from his dash across the grounds. “It's always this group.”

Voices immediately explode from all sides; fingers are pointed; blame is apportioned. The only people who don't say anything are Johnny, Ali, and Daniel, but in the end it doesn't matter. Everyone gets assigned detention.

He collects a bag of ice from the nurse's office to hold against his fat lip, and he spends the rest of the period stewing in the locker room, waiting for the bell.

He sits on the bench and holds himself very still, drawing all his nerves and anger deep down within to where no one might see or ever even guess about them. Out of this deep reservoir he builds a ladder; when he climbs up, he takes it with him. He's done feeling anything about this situation. He's done giving anything to it.

The door to the locker room squeals as it opens. He looks at the clock on the wall above the door to the showers. Five minutes before the class usually starts heading back in to change.

“Watch out,” he says dully to the not-empty room. “I know karate.”

Johnny steps around the bank of lockers. He looks down at him.

Daniel turns his head and stares at the locker opposite him on the bench. “What do you want?”

“I want to know," he says with forced calm, "why you decided to show up today and turn my life into a living hell.”

Daniel cocks his mouth against the new bruise. He shakes his head and laughs. “I have nothing to say to you.”

Johnny takes an angry step forward, but Daniel slides a dark look over and he stops at just the one. His face goes tight with frustration. “Now

you have nothing to say to me? *Now*? You don't think you could have decided you had nothing to say to me – oh, I don't know. Before all this?"

The reservoir inside Daniel roils, threatening to erupt. He breathes in and out and in and out and he says coldly at the grey grate of one of the lockers that have been left open, "I was trying to treat you like a human being. I see now that was me being hopelessly optimistic." He turns and meets his eyes. "You're just a fucking animal, aren't you."

Johnny blinks, face twisting. "Is this because I hit you? C'mon, it's a bruise, big deal. It's just a little pain."

Daniel drops the hand holding the ice bag. He studies the cubes swimming in their own melt and then he gets up to go throw the bag away. Johnny turns to watch his progress across the room and back. He is starting to look some way about the conversation, but Daniel is no longer interested in trying to stare into that particular crystal ball.

"What do you think is going to happen at the tournament?" demands Johnny, insistent and whining. "You think it's a bunch of love taps? Why would you sign up for it if you couldn't take a simple hit?"

Daniel pulls open his locker and takes out his tank and plaid. He pulls his gym sweater off and shrugs the tank on, follows it up with the plaid.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" continues Johnny, incredulous.

"I want you to leave me alone from now on," says Daniel. He ignores the sound of Johnny's breath catching, because it doesn't mean anything to him now. He drags his sweatpants down, steps out of them.

"Look, it doesn't have to be over," says Johnny quickly. "I mean, if you'd just stop trying to push all the time. It's not ruined." He watches him reach into the locker and shake out his jeans, and his voice turns ugly. "You know, I don't get you."

"Yeah, that's obvious. This whole thing was a mistake." And then he drops the jeans on the floor because Johnny tries to grab him. He dodges the arm and uses it as leverage to pin the other boy against the lockers; in his shock, Johnny doesn't fight back.

Daniel stares into his wide eyes. He decides he doesn't like what he sees: what he'd thought this whole time was need and curiosity,

maybe it's just been arrogance. Presumption. Spoiled rich boy thinking he could get whatever he wanted. Maybe that's why he liked being bossed around so much: a novelty; probably never once heard the word *no* at home.

“You like me telling you what to do, Johnny?” he says quietly, and a day ago he might've stepped in to touch him more intimately, but today he keeps his hands on his shoulder and wrist, impersonal. “Here's an order for you: don't ever touch me again.”

He releases him. Johnny stays pressed against the locker for a few seconds, slow to take himself away and shake out his shoulders.

Daniel kicks his jeans back up into his hands and puts them on, his skin prickling over as he holds himself vigilant for any further attempts from the other boy. But Johnny doesn't try anything again. He doesn't say anything either. When Daniel turns with his backpack and brushes past him, his expression is wiped clean, perfectly blank. Empty again.

Detention

“Your problem,” Frankie tells him once the guys have taken a look at his fat lip, “is that you're kinda mouthy, but you're all alone. You can't mix it like that. Get real, man. If you're going to go around picking fights with Hills kids, you need back-up. Friends – you know, someone who'll slash a few tires for you.”

Rock and Bug nod in agreement.

“I've got friends,” says Daniel. And he'd like more of them, so he is going to ignore the mouthy comment. You only get called mouthy when people think you shouldn't be talking at all in the first place. Nobody calls Tommy mouthy, for example.

“Girls don't count,” says Frankie dismissively.

“Excuse me?” says Susan, laying her cards down and narrowing her eyes.

“Sorry,” he tells her. “I should've been more specific – Hills girls don't count. Have you ever even held a pocket blade?”

“So you like Wham!, huh,” says Rock to Barbara, whose hand flutters briefly to the pin on her knit sweater before returning to her cards. “*Make it Big* was alright, I guess – not as strong as *Fantastic*.”

“Oh, I disagree,” she says, eyes flying wide. She leans forward. “I think they're just about to come into their own. You can see the growth in George's songwriting just from last year!”

“Hey, that's a pretty good hand you got there,” Daniel says to Ali in an undertone.

She leans away from him, eyebrows going up. “And I'm pretty sure you're not supposed to be peeking.”

“Hey, I'm just illustrating how you need to improve your hand discipline. How else are we going to take over Vegas?”

Her mouth curls slightly at his nonsense. “Oh, we're going to Vegas? And when is this little trip happening?”

Daniel looks at his hand; he has a pair of sevens. He calls Susan's two cents and raises a nickel. “Hey, I'm eighteen in a couple weeks, you're

turning eighteen in March, right? Gotta start training now, I figure. By June, we'll be an unstoppable crack team of card sharks."

The mood had been pretty dire when he first walked into detention after school. The supervisor looked at him as if she'd never hated anyone so much in her entire career, like she was actively considering foregoing her pension and switching jobs. The girls were bunched close to the door, still looking generally angry while the Cobras occupied the opposite back corner of the room like an enemy camp in low spirits; no rough-housing today, because their leader had his head down in his arms, his face turned to stare out the window.

Certain bridges were burned, but not all – so Daniel suggested the girls join him in playing cards: c'mon, these guys don't bite, they're actually pretty friendly, and Ali, just think of what your parents would say.

"Can you believe those traitors," says Dutch now loudly, sneering over at them all. "Mixing with the trash?"

"I don't know, I wouldn't mind playing cards," says Bobby. "It'd be a nice distraction from what Sensei's gonna do to us all when we get to the dojo late."

"God, don't remind me," says Tommy, groaning and stretching backwards in his desk. He twists and pokes Johnny's shoulder. "Hey, Johnny, what'd he make you do all those days you came late because of detention?"

Johnny doesn't respond, or not so Daniel can hear over the card game.

"Sorry about them," says Barbara awkwardly to the group around the table.

Bug shrugs. "Let's see how late they'll be to their little karate club when we slash all their bike tires."

The girls shift uncomfortably, and Daniel tries to work out if he approves of this plan or not. On one hand, destruction of personal property is right up there next to murder and treason; on the other hand, does this mean by Frankie's own logic that Daniel has friends now?

"I've been saying it all semester," says Ali, not raising the bet when it comes to her, even though she has a full house; she's really not very good at poker. "The best way to deal with those guys is to pretend

they don't exist. You can't let their problems become your problem."

Daniel chews his cheek. He looks at her and mouths *sorry*, and she shrugs and shakes her head: it's fine.

"Eh. Those guys, they don't even exist," says Frankie. "Not outside this room – and not even in it. Not to me."

They finish bidding and show their cards. Barbara flips; she has a straight flush. The hooligans stare at her as she neatly reaches and pulls the pot of change towards her.

"Hell of a poker face you got there," says Rock, admiring.

"Thanks," she says primly.

everything in its right place

He said goodbye to his friends on the street and threw his duffle bag onto the passenger seat. He was stiffening up, an unusual ache between his shoulder blades that said he'd overdone it somehow, though he knew his form had been perfect. No, it was something else, had to be.

“Mr. Lawrence.”

His head was turning before his name was fully in the air between them.

Sensei Kreese was at the door of the dojo, locking up. He was dressed in his civvies, a dark jacket and thick work shirt Johnny's mother would never let him be caught dead in: the everyday clothes of a man with nothing to prove to the world. Somehow he looked more dangerous in them than he ever did in his gi; it was the kind of thought Johnny figured the other boys probably didn't have.

“Yes, Sensei?” he asked. And if it came out too soft, well. It was late. It was probably fine.

Sensei flipped his keys along his finger and pocketed them. He ambled down the sidewalk, and under the yellow streetlights his expression became clear. He was frowning at Johnny, generous mouth made hard with consideration. Eyes sharp, head tilted. Like he was trying to figure out what was wrong with him.

Johnny tried to not let on how tension flooded his body. The ache between his shoulder blades cried out.

“I've always thought of you as a leader to the others,” said Sensei quietly, and Johnny said nothing because the man's voice suggested he wasn't done with the thought. Sensei let the pause grow anyway and then, just as Johnny was beginning to think he should apologize, he said, “but this recent business with you being so late and distracted has me wondering.”

“I'm sorry, Sensei,” he said quickly. “It shouldn't happen again.” And he didn't think about why; he didn't need to. He could follow an order, and Sensei was basically giving him one.

“*Shouldn't*?” he said, stepping closer.

When Johnny was a few years younger, he used to find himself swaying towards the man when he sounded a certain way. He hadn't understood why, and then he had and nearly quit karate. But he got better; now he didn't move. He didn't even blink.

“It won't,” said Johnny.

Sensei's eyes seemed like they could see to the core truth of him, but unlike Daniel LaRusso he never did anything with the knowledge. Most days, Johnny hoped he was imagining it; some late nights, he imagined he wasn't, and what that might feel like.

“This could be your year, Mr. Lawrence,” he said. “We could become the first dojo to produce a three-time All Valley Champion. You want that, don't you?”

Johnny wanted it more than anything in the world, and he wanted Sensei to watch him do it: make history, do something no one's done before. Johnny was going to rise above the rest, to the kind of height where everything else about a person stripped away and all that remained was greatness. He was going to become untouchable.

And Sensei was going to watch him do it.

“Yes, Sensei,” he said.

Miyagi

Friday night, he backs out of his planned date with Ali, telling her he needs to think about some things and he'll see her tomorrow at Susan's party. Her tone goes odd and distant on the other end of the line, and he hastens to explain he isn't trying to mess around (thinking: he's already messed up).

“I just,” he tries to explain, wishing he'd done this at school before break, where he could look her in the eye and make his sincerity clear, “I have a lot to think about after everything that went down at school. In terms of what to do next, I mean. I swear I'm not trying to – to duck you, or whatever.”

“Well,” she says tentatively, “maybe we could work it out together?”

His mouth curls into the phone and turns to put his head back against the wall. His finger tangles through the cord. “I ah, I don't think I'd be a very good partner on that particular group project just yet. Not until get my own thinking straight. But I promise we'll talk tomorrow? At Susan's?”

She sounds a little subdued as she agrees and says goodbye, but there isn't anything else he can think to say at the moment. He kicks himself as he hangs up the phone, wishing bitterly he'd never even heard the name Johnny Lawrence.

He leans against the kitchen wall and stares into the middle distance, imagining it: he and Ali hanging out on the beach back in September. If they'd been able to sit and talk until the fires were burned to coals or her friends pulled her away, whichever happened sooner. And then when they'd seen each other in school the next day, there wouldn't be any black eye for her to apologize about or looming threat to distract him from pursuing her. They could've let the attraction takes its normal exploring course, however it was gong to shake out.

Were they sabotaged from the very beginning, haunted by that third shadow of Johnny?

Daniel shakes his head and pulls himself out of the thoughts. He doesn't want to think about Johnny.

So he grabs his bike and heads over to Mr. Miyagi's place, and there he finds his friend insensate near the bottom of a liquor bottle.

Not knowing what else to do, he tries to go along with it for a while: gamely asking questions because that's how conversations between them usually go. But this time it doesn't seem to work. Whatever direction the man's thoughts are going down, they can't be helped or changed by any impulse to guidance; Mr Miyagi's lost in the dark on a well-trodden path, and the destination will always be the same.

And that destination, Daniel finds out a few minutes later, is basically as final as it gets.

Mr. Miyagi passes out, and he helps him on the bed. He tries to settle him on his side, because he thinks he heard that somewhere. He draws the blanket over the man's bulky uniform, eyes lingering on the alien military olive, the marks and medals that mean something to someone in the know. He wonders what they mean to Mr. Miyagi.

Did you ever get into fights when you were a kid?

Plenty!

Yeah, but it wasn't like the problem I have, right?

Fighting, fighting. Same-same.

Daniel didn't even know he'd fought in the war.

His eyes alight on the crumpled letter in his hand, and he carefully extricates it from the man's grip. He reads it. And since he doesn't know what else to do or where else to go, he returns to his default solution – he finds more to read.

Daniel returns to the table – gazing for a long moment at the framed photo of Mr. Miyagi's wife – and he methodically goes through the stack of old newspapers, trying to understand. After he's done, he gets up and goes outside to sit on the quiet end of the deck path and stare out at the dark garden.

You mean there were times you were scared to fight?

Always scared – Miyagi hate fighting.

He wonders when Mr. Miyagi bought this place, if he'd ever pictured raising a family here. But if his wife and son died during the war then

– no, probably not. The house only has one bedroom.

He thinks about the letter. He tries to imagine being a young guy, maybe only a little older than he is right now, and receiving that letter.

When Daniel's dad died, his mother had stayed at the hospital with him for almost forty hours. She wanted to be with him for as long as she could, until that very last second. Daniel remembers sleeping on the sofa at his Uncle Louie's house, the way time stretched and settled into something inert as all the adults around him made phone calls and had hushed conversations in the kitchen, and still his mom didn't appear. In his memory, he knows he said goodbye to him, but he can't remember when it happened.

But Mr. Miyagi didn't get to say goodbye at all. To his son, he never even got to say hello. He wonders if he ever asked *and for what:* what did he fight for, why did he go through that pain.

Sergeant Miyagi reporting. Killed many Jerry Germans, sir.

He has seen Mr. Miyagi beat five guys at once and slice the tops of glass bottles with the simple edge of his hand, but he can't imagine him killing someone. He can't imagine him as a young guy leaving his wife in a wretched government camp to go kill strangers, only to come home to nothing and nobody.

Daniel looks around again at the carefully pruned and guided trees, the blooming flowers.

First time he saw this place, he'd thought it just another funny quirk to Mr. Miyagi's whole deal – but now he thinks: of course this guy would find an empty lot as far from other people as he could get in the valley; of course he'd build a fence to block everything else out. It now makes sense to Daniel, in a way that kinda hurts his chest. Everyone chooses how they're going to spend their life, and Mr. Miyagi chose to grow a garden of living things (that couldn't talk back).

But you don't water a tree with poison and expect it to thrive – the means and the ends are inseparable, Daniel read that in one of his books. And peace comes after war, like peace came for Mr. Miyagi – but what if it's a broken peace, full of grief and mistrust? Daniel believes the man chose as best he could, after his first choice was taken from him.

...Is Daniel really going to let others make his choice for him?

Who the hell is he, Johnny Lawrence?

Tracking

“Oh,” says Susan, unenthused at her open door. “You came.”

Daniel spreads his hands. “Am I not your favorite person? Deep down?”

And then she actually tries to block his entry to the party, but he eels under her arm – he's been training in karate for four weeks, hello. And she must sense this vast skills gap, because she gives up pretty quickly.

“Okay, but you have to be cool,” she says. “There are actual *normal* people at this party. I've told everyone else the same thing.”

Daniel looks around at the crowded house and raises his eyebrows. “You've told every person here they have to be cool? That doesn't sound like good host etiquette.”

“You know what I mean,” she says, but no, he doesn't really. Before he can get her to clarify, however, she is distracted by a pair of people attempting to go upstairs. She shouts at them before glancing back. “By the way, Josh Mackey is looking for you, so watch out.”

“*Who*?” he asks, but she is already gone. He shrugs and turns to go find Ali.

Johnny looms out at him from the sitting room like a jack in the box: path and facial expression predetermined; threat: negligible, probably. He is holding a beer. “Hey, I want to talk to you,” he says, tense.

“Not interested,” says Daniel, clipped. He moves on down the hall towards the kitchen.

In the kitchen, he finds Barbara talking to a familiar guy, and it's only after they've greeted him that he realizes the guy is actually Rock; he is sans leather jacket and his hair is combed; his flannel and jeans are relatively hole-free – actually Daniel doesn't think he looks all that different, he might just be distracted. No, yeah, he definitely looks pretty much the same. Good-looking guy, he thinks absently.

“Hey, either of you seen Ali?” he asks them, and they shake their heads.

“Oh, watch out, by the way – Josh Mackey is looking for you,”

Barbara calls after him as he circles out of the kitchen into the dining room. He waves a hand over his shoulder.

He moves through the rooms of the house – *so* many rooms for increasingly inexplicable purposes, he has never thought to appreciate the efficiency of a tiny apartment before, and he supposes this is why they call them efficiencies, huh.

He realizes he doesn't actually know most of the people here. Does *Susan* know all these people? When does she have time to talk to them all.

Ali isn't in any of the rooms on the first floor, so he makes his way back to the front hall through the thicket of bodies, thinking he might check upstairs. Susan would let Ali up there, even if she didn't let anyone else.

"*Daniel*," says Johnny in the dining room, and he has upgraded to a very full plastic cup containing a potent-smelling mix, something sharp and dark.

"I have something to say to you," he continues.

"How about you write it down, if you can," says Daniel without stopping. "And maybe slip it in my locker on Monday."

"But you never visit your locker," says Johnny, confused. And yeah, that's kind of the point? Daniel expects the guy will get he's been insulted in like, ten minutes. Ten minutes or never, one of the two.

He finds Susan refilling a bowl of potato chips on the kitchen island. She looks stressed and irate with it, so he debates saying anything to her for about a second before he ends up saying to her:

"Hey, who are all these people, anyway?" And he takes a potato chip while he's there, because he's kind of hungry.

She punches the empty potato bag with her fist to crumple it into a very noisy ball; turns to throws it away; slams the cupboard holding the trash can *very* loudly. His brow knits. He slowly eats another potato chip.

"I told you," she says, "they're normal people. From our school. They exist, actually, did you know?"

He nods as if he understands, while understanding very little. He

thinks about it. “Is this a delayed reaction to your one measly afternoon in detention?”

“You know it's your fault, right?” she demands. “And I'm not even talking about the way you keep provoking Johnny and the others—”

“Johnny and the others would be provoked by their own reflection in a dark room,” he says.

“Johnny and the others have been weird about karate forever! But they never dragged *us* into it before – not until you came around. You – you crossed the streams,” she concludes, throwing her head back and folding her arms.

Daniel's mouth drops open. “I did no such thing!”

She leans over the counter. “You did, you crossed the streams, and it blew everything up, and now we're all stuck picking marshmallow out of our hair for the rest of the year.”

“You know, did you ever perhaps *notice* that your so-called best friend happens to agree with me about all this?” he says, bracing his hands on the counter and meeting her glare from inches away. “I think if you ask Ali if she feels *Johnny* left her 'out of it' before, she'd have a different answer.”

“Sure, she might agree with you – and look where that's got her. Sulking in the backyard instead of having fun at my – great – *amazing* – *party*.”

Daniel eats another potato chip. “Thanks for telling me where she is,” he says smugly, turning for the patio door.

“Oh, yeah, go. Just wait and see if I tell Josh Mackey where *you* are,” she shouts at his back.

Outside, the music and chatter of the party are greatly muted. Daniel wipes his potato chip fingers on his shirt and tucks his hands into his pockets. He crosses the patio, nearly stumbling as he belatedly notices the off-center placement of the deck steps. He hops down to the grass and crosses the lawn to where Ali is curled up on a swing bench beneath a large plastic awning. She gives him a tired smile.

“Hey,” he says.

“Hey,” she says softly, and then her eyes shoot wide in alarm.

Daniel spins around, arms coming up, but it's just some guy standing on the patio. He's tall, red-headed, and kinda pissed.

"You Daniel LaRusso?"

Daniel glances at Ali, who whispers helpfully *Josh Mackey*; it's devastatingly unhelpful. He looks back at Josh Mackey. "...Yes?"

He wonders if he still needs his hands up. It kind of has the feel of a situation where his hands should be up? But if he keeps them up, is he closing himself and Josh Mackey off to alternative, peaceful possibilities? To some people, preemptive defense is basically indistinguishable from preparatory offense. Look at the intellectual foundations of nuclear proliferation! Look at America and the USSR!

Josh Mackey says he's going to kick his ass, and this saves Daniel from further agonizing over the appropriate geopolitical analogy.

"Look," begins Daniel. "I'm not going to fight you."

"Good, you can just stand there while I punch your lights out," says Josh Mackey, and when he steps forward, several people pour out onto the patio after him. It's becoming a whole thing, Daniel thinks with sinking despair. Susan is never going to forgive him.

"Josh! Josh, I told you to *leave it*," cries a familiar girl in pigtail braids from the doorway, and abruptly the situation becomes clear to Daniel.

He drops his hands, only to raise them again to gesticulate. "For the love of god, Lisa, I swear, I didn't even *mean it* like that? You know, when people go around saying someone has a big mouth, they're not commenting on the literal size of—"

"Don't even talk to her, asshole," snaps the loyal boyfriend, and great, suddenly Daniel is the bad guy in this situation.

He throws his hands back up in resigned readiness, but Josh Mackey trips on that weirdly-placed step on the edge of the patio. He goes sprawling.

Daniel's hands waver in the air as he tries quickly to reassess the situation. Moment over? Hard to maintain a fighting spirit when you've tripped in front of a half-dozen people; it's so embarrassing.

Except then Johnny pushes through the people bunched at the patio door, and he looks a lot more drunk than he had back in the dining

room.

"Oh, for fuck's sake," says Daniel.

This nonviolence thing is so much harder than it looks.

Party

Daniel takes in the sight of Johnny over on the deck, now snarling indiscriminately at all onlookers to *mind your own fucking business, fuck off, I mean it,* and he turns to Ali.

“Maybe we should just get out of here?” he suggests. “Find some place quiet to talk?”

Ali stands up from the swing so quickly, it rattles and knocks the back of her legs. She tucks her hands into the ends of her sweater and then anxiously follows up with her arms across her chest. “I think that's probably a good idea.”

They step carefully around a red-faced Josh Mackey on the grass, and cautiously start to sidle towards the patio door. Why doesn't this yard have a gate, he wonders: some kind of side access? What kind of confrontation-happy weirdo designed this house?

Johnny finishes shooing the last of the other party-goers inside, and he slides the door shut just as they reach it. Daniel grimaces.

On the inside, Susan appears at the glass. She casts an exasperated look between them all and shakes her head, and you know what, maybe *Daniel* will never forgive *her*. She doesn't seem to understand the mood out here – for that matter, he doesn't understand the mood out here.

What's the mood out here?

For his part, Johnny is nodding and blinking a lot at the planks of the deck, like a fighter listening very intently to his coach's advice. Except no one is talking. At his side, he still has a cup pinched tightly between his forefinger and thumb. Daniel wonders if it's the same drink from before; somehow he doubts it.

He says, “So I think we were just going—”

“You're going to listen to me,” snaps Johnny, and he throws the cup down on the deck. Ali flinches slightly, but there is minimal splashing. The cup was mostly empty, it turns out.

“Okay,” says Daniel evenly. “I'll listen to you. Fine. Great. How about we let Ali return to the party, though? Susan probably wants to talk

her ear off about how it's going."

"I'm staying," says Ali, and when Daniel shoots her an unhappy look, her only response is to put her arm through his like an environmentalist chaining herself to a tree that is about to be bulldozed to make way for a shopping mall – it's a very specific flavor of stubborn, okay. Just trust him.

"*Okay*," says Daniel again, gritting his teeth. He turns back to Johnny with forced patience. "So – what did you want to talk about, Johnny?"

Johnny nods hugely and takes a step back. He spreads his arms wide and meets Daniel's eyes for a flickering second before saying, halting, "Hit me."

Daniel abruptly feels very tired. If he didn't think it would provoke the guy, he'd rub his face, maybe pinch the bridge of his nose. He's really not built for this diplomatic impassivity thing. But he tries: he braces a hand on his hip and takes a bolstering breath before saying simply:

"What?"

"I want you to hit me," says Johnny.

He waits; Johnny stares expectantly.

"Look," says Daniel. "I'm not saying you haven't done like, a million a things to deserve it, but is there any particular reason *why* you—"

"Just fucking hit me," he says loudly, "and then, you know – we'll be even, or whatever, and then we can—"

Daniel's eyes shoot wide. "That's okay," he says hastily. "Really."

Johnny's face falls. "You're not going to do it."

"No."

"Why not?" he demands.

"Oh my god," says Ali. "He's so drunk."

Daniel is beginning to get kind of angry, and he doesn't have the mental energy to figure out where it's coming from or what it's about, but he knows enough; he knows it wouldn't be there if not for Johnny.

He steps forward, and Ali's arm slides out from his elbow. He crosses

the patio to Johnny, who straightens up and gathers his limbs and body like he's expecting Daniel to have changed his mind in the past few seconds, and it only feeds Daniel's anger because if Johnny doesn't know this then he's going to fucking learn – once Daniel's decided something, he doesn't just change his mind. *Case in point—*

"I'm not going to hit you," he says deliberately, staring into the other boy's bright, feverish eyes, "because that's not going to make us even, and the fact that you think it *could* is just part of the problem. I'm not going to hit you, because that's not going to fix anything. There is no version of this little scene that," and he has to think quickly, adjust his wording, "that will result in what you want it to... result in."

Johnny's jaw goes tight, and Daniel shakes his head, marveling.

"What the hell, man," he says. "It's not like you even *like* me." Johnny's face reddens; his jaw gapes open uncertainly, and he immediately looks past Daniel to Ali. That tired feeling hanging over Daniel redoubles; trying to reason with this guy right now is pointless. "Just let it go, alright."

Johnny shakes his head stubbornly. "No, look – if you'd just—"

"I'm not going to hit you," he snaps. "I don't want to."

And he doesn't, he realizes. He's wanted to clock Johnny probably a million times in the past several months, but the desire's gone now, burnt out of him.

Josh Mackey chooses this moment to try to walk past them into the house: head down, rubbing the back of his neck. Johnny reacts to him crossing his peripheral vision like someone being jumped – he lunges and shoves him.

"Who the *fuck* are you?" he shouts, and Daniel gets between them quickly, his hands floating over Johnny's chest to forestall him.

"It's Josh Mackey, man," he says, and he can see the name means nothing to Johnny either. Well, that's comforting. (Or is it?) He turns his head and says, "You should just go."

Josh Mackey doesn't wait to be told again. He makes a beeline for the patio door, muttering about how they shouldn't've come to this party, knew you guys were all so damn weird. Daniel doesn't watch him go; his eyes stick on Ali, watching the two of them with grim realization.

He closes his eyes briefly and steps back from Johnny.

“We'll have it out at the tournament, anyway,” says Johnny doggedly as he turns to go. “So I don't – I don't see what the difference is, why you can't. You could just. It's the same thing.”

Daniel pauses and looks back at him. “The tournament?”

Johnny widens his eyes, like: checkmate.

“Right,” says Daniel, nodding. “Yeah – I'm not fighting in that.”

He lets Johnny sway in place like he's experienced some great shift of the earth's axis and turns back to Ali waiting by the open patio door. He supposes he should be thankful she hasn't just left entirely; most people wouldn't wait for an explanation.

He doesn't make it more than a step before Johnny hauls him around hard by the arm. Daniel breaks the holds and blocks the next attempt, but then Johnny just plants a palm on his chest and shoves him stumbling back towards the house.

“What the *hell*,” says Daniel.

“You made a deal with my sensei,” says Johnny. He almost sounds sober for a second. He is very pale, and the tendons of his neck are tensed, taut.

Daniel rubs his sternum. “No, I didn't,” he says slowly, narrowing his eyes. “My friend did. He thought he was helping me, but I've talked to him and – look, I've decided to find a different solution to my problems. Okay?”

It likely involves avoiding the guy right in front of him, he thinks but does not say; he can be not-provoking, sometimes. He's learning.

He sweeps Johnny with a quick look and says, “Hey, man, this is good news? You can go fight in the tournament, be the big man and win. Whatever. And we'll just avoid each other. It's – it doesn't have to be a big deal.”

Johnny says nothing more. His eyes no longer appear to even be looking at Daniel. His pupils have gone small, like they're telescoping inward.

He's so drunk, Daniel thinks again uneasily. He should probably find

Bobby or Tommy before he leaves the party, make sure they know to check on him. He hesitates for a moment longer before shaking his head and turning back to the house.

He and Ali make it barely five feet through the door and the throng of staring people when something behind them shatters.

A couple girls scream. Daniel whirls around, panic spiking.

Johnny is still standing just outside the house on the patio. He blinks down at the fist he put through the glass of the sliding door like it's a curious sight, while blood streaks in rivulets across his skin to gather and drip in a growing pool at his feet.

Bathroom

“Jesus,” says Daniel, and he rushes at the door, shoes crunching over the shards of broken glass. He gets his hands on Johnny's shoulders and carefully draws him inside. Ali appears on his other side, trying to get a look at his bleeding hand.

“Let's get him to the bathroom,” she says, and Daniel nods. One of his hands slips down to encircle Johnny's wrist: to provide comfort or to support the possibly-injured joint, he doesn't even know. It doesn't matter.

A bowl appears below their triad of hands. Daniel looks down at the potato chips now getting spotted with scarlet. He looks at Susan.

“What, am I supposed to let him bleed all over the floor?” she asks. She shakes the bowl, and the chips rustle frantically. “*Take* it!”

He rolls his eyes but Ali takes the bowl with her free hand. They start to herd Johnny towards the first floor bathroom.

“Can someone please find Bobby Brown?” Daniel calls over his shoulder at the gawking crowd. A few people slip backwards, so at least the Bystander Effect does not have hold over everyone. How reassuring.

Johnny's never been the most talkative of guys, but it's still unnerving to see him so silent. He barely blinks as they walk him into the bathroom; his eyes are down, unfocused. No one has ever seemed to care less that they are bleeding profusely into a bowl that smells of malt vinegar and grease.

“What the hell were you thinking, Johnny?” demands Ali as they get him in front of the sink; Johnny doesn't answer. She hits the tap, but before she can drag his hand beneath the faucet, Daniel says:

“Wait, what if there's little pieces of glass in there? Could that – *should* we rinse it?”

She stares at him wide-eyed in the mirror. “I have no idea.”

Daniel really wishes he'd picked up a first aid book at some point. He nudges Johnny's side and mutters *here, gimme*, and carefully lifts the other boy's hand. He tilts it under the bathroom light, trying to see if

there is any tell-tale glitter of glass. But it's all just red, red, red. Over the plane of his wrecked hand, Johnny's eyes finally lift and look at him with uncomprehending loss.

Daniel swallows and returns the hand to Ali, saying, “Maybe it'll be easier to see under the water.” To Johnny he asks, “How does it feel?” Which is a stupid question, he realizes. But he's jittery with nerves and anxious that he can't do anything more.

“Hurts,” mutters Johnny, indifferent to it.

“Of course it hurts,” says Ali caustically. “You put your fist through a glass door. How did you think that would feel?”

She guides his hand under the water. Johnny flinches slightly, and Daniel can't help but reach up then and fold a hand over the back of his neck. The skin beneath his palm is heated, clammy with sweat.

Something in Johnny's body loosens, and she must feel it because her eyes flicker up to the mirror again. She takes in their reflection and returns to her task, saying in a perfectly neutral voice, “Is that what you wanted to talk to me about, Daniel?”

“Among other things,” he says, a little lame.

“Johnny?” shouts Bobby from outside the bathroom, and the door slams open hard enough to possibly damage the back wall. He takes in the tableau: Johnny's defeated slump, the gore in the sink; Ali and Daniel bracketing him like the angel and devil on his shoulders. He goes pale. “Oh, god. Oh, man. *Johnny*. Sensei's gonna be so pissed.”

As Daniel watches, a tear makes a suicide leap down Johnny's cheek, but his face doesn't so much as twitch in response; he doesn't even look like he knows he's crying.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” demands Daniel, dropping his hand from Johnny's neck and turning to Bobby.

“Oh, don't even start,” he says, giving him a contemptuous once-over.

“I think you need to go to the emergency room,” says Ali, looking at the cuts on his hand beneath the water. The blood keeps sluicing away only to reappear, every second pumping more of Johnny down the drain. She looks up. “Bobby, did you drive? Can you—”

“Yeah,” he says quickly. “Of course. Johnny, come on.”

But Johnny is turning his back on Daniel and Bobby and looking down at Ali. “I ruined everything,” he whispers to her. “Ali, it's all fucked up. What – what am I gonna do?”

Her expression crumples a little, but she smooths it out almost as quick. She shakes her head, and briefly brushes a hand down his arm.

“Johnny, it's just high school,” she says, tired. “And it's almost over. You're going to be fine. Okay? It's all going to be just fine.”

He doesn't look like he believes her, but finally turns to Bobby, who looks a little disturbed but like he's trying to control his expression. He's not as good at it as Ali.

Daniel watches the bloody hand swing out over the bathroom tile. “*Wait.*”

He quickly strips off his plaid. He grabs Johnny's hand and wraps the shirt around his knuckles, aiming somewhere between tight enough to stanch the bleeding, but loose enough not to shove any possible pieces of glass down into his bloodstream, if that's a thing and it might be a thing. Johnny lets him do it, but he doesn't look up, and Daniel doesn't know how to feel about it, any of it.

“Good luck,” he says awkwardly as Bobby gets a hand on his friend's back and ushers him from the bathroom.

In the sudden absence and silence, his bare arms prick over with gooseflesh. He leans against the bathroom counter and blows out a breath. Ali puts her hands on the edge of the sink and hangs her head, staring at the blood streaking the porcelain.

“Things got really messy,” says Daniel eventually. “Between me and him. If – if you couldn't tell.”

He looks down and scuffs his shoes; accidentally smears some drops of blood over the tile. He makes a face down at it. He feels like he is still braced for impact: a delayed reaction, he thinks. The worst has already happened.

Ali tosses her head back on her neck, mass of curls swaying in the air. She stares hard into the mirror at herself before shifting her gaze to Daniel, who twists to meet the reflection of her eyes. They watch each other, and the thing is, the connection is still there; they still have that immediate sense of understanding between them. What they're understanding now just happens to be something kind of awful.

“If you hadn't lied,” she says quietly, “if you'd been honest with me – I could have warned you. He's really messed up – it'll swallow you whole if you get too close.”

Daniel absorbs this. Somehow, it only makes him want to go running after Bobby's car. But he can't tell if this is a good impulse or just another step towards further disaster.

He runs his tongue over his molars, and tries to account for himself. “I'm sorry. It didn't feel like lying. It just – it just happened, somehow.” And even though he'd lived through every moment of the truth of this explanation, it still feels and sounds like complete shit. He doesn't know how to reconcile that in his head.

“Well,” she says on a careful breath, “you should really try to be more careful, I guess.” She sniffs and straightens up, suddenly businesslike. She twists the faucet and splashes water around to dislodge the blood already clotting and clinging to the sink. Without looking at him again, she says, “Can you please leave? I want to get this cleaned up, and I don't want to talk to you right now.”

She looks like she's only barely containing herself, and it hurts to realize he is not allowed to see it. He nods and says again, uselessly, *I'm sorry.* And he quickly leaves the bathroom.

Outside, the party is still largely carrying on, though by the sound of it, at least half the conversations are about what happened on the patio. Daniel weaves his way through the crowd, listening to strangers say *Johnny Lawrence* in the same passingly excited, callous tone a *Last Exit to Brooklyn* character sitting around in the Greek diner might use: something was broken, someone got bloody, hey turn the music up. This is my song.

He finds Susan on the patio, trying to scrub the blood off the deck. It appears to be staining the wood more with every pass of her damp towel. She looks up at his approach through the kitchen, and her expression is inscrutable as ever: the same narrow calculation she's been making of him since the semester started.

“I'm going to blame you and Johnny for this,” she says, matter-of-fact.

He nods and reaches for the broom angled up against the kitchen island. “That's fair.”

“I mean, they hate you both anyway.”

“…Think you can leave Ali out of it?” He looks around for the dustpan; locates it and stoops down to start sweeping up the broken glass from the patio door.

“Of course,” she says, like he has insulted her even by asking. “Even though, honestly, it *is* kind of her fault. I warned her – she didn't listen.”

“Oh, don't even start,” he says, exhausted.

She shakes her head. “What do you expect, dating a queer?”

He stares at her, but she is intent on the lost cause rust stain marring her parent's deck. After a moment, he takes this as a cue and finishes sweeping up the glass.

Tournament

He doesn't see anyone again until Monday, and it's about what he expects; Ali avoids him before school and Susan shrugs at him and follows her; Barbara trails them in confusion while mouthing *what happened?* vehemently back at him.

In study hall, Barbara tries to get him to explain the events of the party, and he gives as brief an explanation as he can manage while also looking around for Johnny.

“Me and Johnny argued,” he says. “He put his fist through the door.”

“But why is Ali so upset?” she asks. “And why does this kind of thing have to happen the moment I get a boyfriend of my own?”

“I mean, to be fair, it's kind of been the same thing happening all semester. You haven't really missed anything.” He pauses. “Congrats on you and Rock, though. Can't say I saw that coming.”

“Alexander's very sweet,” she says, turning her face to smile into space. “He's a lot like you, actually. But taller and really handsome.”

Daniel politely waits a beat, but she doesn't appear ready to offer any kind of retraction or correction to this statement. “Okay?” he says, as if to prompt her, but she only makes a vague affirming sound.

He slouches in his seat, mildly depressed. What, he's not handsome? He thinks he's alright; a guy doesn't fuck up with not one, but *two* hot people in the space of a few weeks unless he's at least a little good-looking. The universe doesn't allow for that sort of thing, it'd be too much bad luck on one person's doorstep. The lord giveth hotness and the lord taketh hotness away.

Speaking of—

Johnny crosses the library in front of them, headed for his usual table. He is holding his trapper keeper with his left hand; the right is wrapped in a splint. But somehow what really draws the eye isn't the screaming white of the bandage or the way he holds the hand. It's that Johnny has shorn off all his hair.

“Hey, you hear anything from the guys about how Johnny's doing?” he asks her in an undertone.

She shakes her head and shrugs, highlighting something in a handout. “Susan said Tommy said their teacher was really angry, and they all had to come in on Sunday for like, six hours of training or something.”

Jeez. “He made Johnny train with an injured hand?”

“Oh, I don't know.” She frowns at him. “He couldn't, right?”

Daniel can only shrug in response. He kind of gets the impression that guy can do basically anything inside his dojo; he certainly had carried himself like it.

He gazes across the library, chewing his lip. “I should go talk to him,” he says after a couple minutes have passed. It's not like he's getting any work done anyway.

She glances up from her worksheet, and her eyes flick over to Johnny. She shakes her head in resignation. “Do what you want, Daniel, but step carefully – last time I saw someone shave their head like that? It was my oldest cousin Julie. She got dumped and started experimenting with punk music. Broke my aunt's heart.”

Daniel squints at her, but she doesn't appear to be kidding. God, he needs to move back to Newark, he thinks.

Before he even gets within ten feet of the table, Johnny's eyes move down from the ceiling and track his approach. His expression is quiet, hard to read. He might be a little embarrassed, Daniel thinks.

He steps up to the table until he's bumping it with his thighs. He looks over Johnny's bandaged hand and lets his eyes wander up to his bare skull. It's pretty hard to pull off a shaved head without looking sickly or like someone with questionable political affiliations, and Johnny doesn't succeed. What must the country club think?

Daniel wonders if Johnny will still wear the headband now he has nothing to hold back from his eyes.

“How's your hand?” he asks, because that's safe enough, kind of.

“It's fine,” says Johnny. He'd likely say this even if his hand had been amputated.

Daniel grimaces a little down at the table. He doesn't know what to say here: he is in the bizarre position of not actually knowing much about most things about this guy, while knowing far too much about a

few things. It's hardly the basis for a wellness check.

“Heard you guys were training hard this weekend,” he says.

Johnny blinks. His opaque blue eyes shift an inch off center from Daniel's gaze, so it looks like he's looking at him while really he's looking at nothing. “The others did. They were making up for the hours I can't do this week.”

“Well. That's sounds,” he begins, but Johnny cuts him off.

“It's none of your business.”

Daniel presses his lips together and stares at him. He gets nothing back. He sighs and knocks his knuckles against the table: one, two, three.

“Look,” he says, “I don't know what I'm doing here. I just thought – ”

He doesn't know what he thought, he never did when it came to Johnny. It was kind of the whole problem.

Daniel glances around the library, chewing his bottom lip. Johnny is still watching him, expressionless. It's hard to remember the guy in the bathroom on Saturday night. Except for the bandage on his hand, and the shaved head, and that frustrating feeling of intuition Daniel finds impossible to ignore.

“I just wanted to check that you're okay,” he says finally.

“I'm fine,” says Johnny, almost before Daniel finishes speaking.

Daniel nods. “Sure, yeah. I got that.” He knocks the table with his knuckles again, mouth hooking up awkwardly as he makes himself meet that walled gaze. “But uh, if you – weren't? I mean, if you still felt bad. Like you did on Saturday. Hurting.” He has no fucking clue what he is trying to say here. “I would... not like that.”

“So are you going to fight in the tournament?” is all Johnny asks.

Daniel almost cusses him out; he bites it back and makes himself smile tightly instead. “No. No, I am not.” He narrows his eyes. “And surely neither are you? I mean, your hand—”

“It's,” starts Johnny, and Daniel cuts him off: it's fine, right. Right, gotcha.

This fucking guy. It's like talking to a brick wall. Maybe if they were alone, and Daniel could touch him – but Daniel is definitely not going down that road again. Despite what his gut says, it won't solve anything.

Daniel tips his chin. “What's with the new hairdo, anyway?”

Johnny shrugs. His good hand drifts up and runs over the back of his skull, and Daniel swears he can hear the rasp in the quiet of the library.

“Felt like a change,” mutters Johnny. He shifts his bandaged club of a hand awkwardly across the table as he sits up. He flips open a notebook like he's actually going to do some work, and then looks at Daniel still standing there like he's being a *terrible* imposition.

Daniel puts his hands up and steps back. “Alright.” But he hesitates, fighting with himself. He tries one last time: “You know, she was right? What Ali said. I don't know what you remember from Saturday, but – it's just high school, man.”

Johnny's jawbone flickers beneath his skin. He glances up at Daniel like he's sneaking a look, and seems unprepared to find Daniel already watching him closely. He glances past him around the library and says, low:

“What's wrong with me isn't going to go away after graduation.”

And then – face scarlet like he thinks he's already said too much – Johnny puts his head down and hunches over his notebook. His left hand is clumsy in picking up his pencil. He stalls out without writing as Daniel continues to not leave.

“Go away,” he says shortly.

“Yeah, okay,” says Daniel, except instead he plants a hand on the table and leans in.

“You know, when you aren't running around being a dick to everyone, or threatening to kick my ass, or, like – actually kicking my ass? When we were – when it was just the two of us? I think I liked that guy sometimes.” Daniel looks over the pale curve of Johnny's bare head, still stubbornly turned down. “And I don't think there was anything wrong with him.”

When Johnny doesn't raise his head or give any sign of having

listened, Daniel nods again. He steps back with finality and returns to his seat, and he doesn't try to look or talk to Johnny again.

A couple weeks later, he hears Johnny Lawrence gets his stitches out and takes off his splint to fight in the tournament. He hears he wins; no fighter lands so much as a single point on him. He hears this makes him the first ever three-time All Valley champion in the history of the tournament, a title of unknown significance to Daniel, but he gathers it means something to the valley.

He hears all this, and he doesn't know what it means for himself; he is wary at school afterwards, mindful of the bet Mr. Miyagi made with the Cobra Kai sensei.

But no one from Cobra Kai touches him. They don't even look at him. Days pass and the semester comes to an end, and Daniel realizes – the strangest four months of his life are over.

Spring

“Okay, okay, let's try something else,” says Daniel, once Mr. Miyagi has given up and shut the hood of the coupe. He looks over the steering wheel through the windshield and gestures emphatically for him to open it again. He twists in the seat and climbs out of the car. “Let's trade places. C'mon.”

Mr. Miyagi shakes his head but creaks the hood open. He passes Daniel muttering about how *can't learn from book*, and Daniel tucks his finger into his mechanical guide to save his place and showily offers him the driver's door like he's giving him the best seat in the house.

It turns out it had been a good thing Daniel had loved the Ford so much when Mr. Miyagi offered him his choice of cars for his birthday; the rest of the fleet was in varying states of disrepair. The problem, he discovered, was not that Mr. Miyagi lacked the know-how to fix them, but with no one around, he'd gradually lost interest over the years.

Except for the coupe. He definitely didn't know how to fix the Nash coupe.

“I'll admit you can't learn *some* things from a book,” says Daniel, circling around to stand before the open hood. He plops his book down on the edge and glances at the diagram he'd been studying. Continues talking loudly for Mr. Miyagi's benefit. “Like sure, karate is an art and it's no good learning art from a book. I get it. But this is a *machine*, Mr. Miyagi. There is a right way and a wrong way to deal with it.”

“Finding own path to right way more rewarding,” says Mr. Miyagi, and the words are followed up with a rough grating sound; he has put the seat back.

Daniel ducks down and starts tinkering, glancing occasionally back at the guide. After twenty minutes of squinting and sweating and getting grease all over his hands and forearms as he stretches down into the bowels of the tiny car, he finishes tightening a bolt and stands back. He nearly hits his head on the hood.

“Okay!” he calls with more confidence than he feels. “Give her a try.”

He waits, hands on hips and listening hard, as if the ancient engine might start up and be too quiet to hear. He bites the tip of his tongue

and only barely avoids dancing in place. *Come on....*

The engine coughs and catches and rumbles to life, and he hollers his triumph up into the cloudless spring sky.

In the second semester shuffle of classes, Daniel mostly loses track of Johnny. The other boy either drops or switches study halls, and Daniel ends up in first lunch because he decides to take a shop class. He has fulfilled his P.E. requirement for graduation, and nothing in the universe could compel him to take another gym class.

They still have history together third period, though.

Once a day Daniel gets a look at the other boy: a rotating glimpse as he turns to settle in his seat, or a passing upwards glance if Johnny arrives after him. It's through the progress of this daily split-second flipbook that he watches Johnny's hair grow out into a bristling crew cut; it only serves to make him look like a little boy not yet old enough to make his own hair choices – except for the moments where it makes him look hard like a Marine just back from basic training.

Their eyes never meet and they don't speak; they never really had before, in history. So it only makes sense.

Once, Daniel asks to go the bathroom, and something about his own somber reflection in the mirror has him hesitating and lingering for an extra minute: hand gripping the hall pass tightly and listening hard, as if any second now, steps will come down the hallway just outside, and the door will open, and Johnny will be there. It never happens.

And what bothers Daniel most isn't actually the avoidance or silence, but the question of what his feelings about it all *mean*. Maybe he'd feel this strange sense of unfinished business no matter what, because that's just how it is when you're queer; maybe it can't ever work out, because they're not built for it, or the world isn't.

Or maybe that's all bullshit, and Daniel feels this way because it ended badly without ever having properly started, and part of him still wonders how it would have felt if Johnny had ever – just once – smiled into his eyes.

He goes to prom because Susan's date comes down with Mono a week before the dance, and she refuses to lower herself to going with Andrew Cartwright from her Communications class.

“But if Andrew has Mono,” says Daniel, curious across the cafeteria table, “doesn't that mean – *you*—?”

Susan looks at him like he's so slow, he's basically roadkill waiting to happen and she can already smell it. “I haven't kissed him.”

“Oh,” he says, nonplussed.

“Anyway, if you come, you might be able to talk to Ali – no promises, but I think she has softened enough to permit you to be her friend. Maybe. If you don't screw it up by doing something stupid, like making out with a boy right in front of her.”

“Can we, maybe – I don't know – *not* talk about that?” he asks, glancing around the noisy lunchroom.

She takes a neat sip from her milk carton and widens her eyes at him. But she shrugs and lets it go; she always lets it go, only to inevitably bring it up again a little down the road. Something about the topic seems to fascinate her, but when pressed, she always just shrugs.

“Wait, do I have to get you a damn corsage?” he asks, near the end of lunch.

She smirks. “Boy, it better be big.”

Unbelievable.

Prom

“Well, this looks fun,” says Daniel, gamely trying to mean it. He looks around the gymnasium, festooned with sparkling streamers and lit with moody colors. “Do you think Barbara and Rock are already here?”

“Can't you just call him Alexander like everyone else?” asks Susan, leaning heavily on his arm as she adjusts the strap of her heel. “Or Alex, if you insist on a nickname?”

“He was Rock when I met him, and I found him first,” says Daniel, determined. “You're not taking this from me.” He'll be damned if he gives up having a friend with cool nickname. He still hasn't recovered from Bug being a Walter.

“Whatever.” She does something to her shoe and straightens up, tossing her permed hair over her shoulder.

“Anyway, let's dance,” he says, and he grabs her hand, ready to pounce forward and start swinging – but she yanks herself from his grip with a violence that is frankly uncalled for; he stares at her, betrayed. “What the hell?”

“I don't come to these things to *dance*,” she says, incredulous in her floor-length gown. “I come to be seen, and to judge.”

Unbelievable.

He puts his hands on his hips beneath his jacket. “Suze, you're the worst date a guy could ask for.”

So he doesn't get many chances to dance – he cuts in a couple places where he thinks the guy won't try to break his face and where a girl clearly needs a break, but most of the school hates him for some reason, so these opportunities are few and far in between.

Forty minutes into what is turning into a very boring night, he spies Ali standing off to the side without her date. He thinks about what Susan said and decides to approach her. She clocks him almost immediately, but she doesn't turn or run away, so he's counting

himself still in the game – or if not the game, supportively cheering in the stands.

“Hey,” he says, and she returns it neatly. He gestures at her purple gown and says, “You uh – you look great.”

“Thanks. So do you.”

He glances down at his powder blue number. “Oh, this little thing?” He performs a light clap-spin-and-stomp, kicking a leg out for a second before relaxing out of the position. “Just something I had lying around," he says modestly.

Her lips compress, and her hands tangle together like she wishes she had some punch to hold; he wonders if he should ask if she wants some punch to hold. But maybe that's pushing it too far into date territory. He doesn't want her thinking he's trying anything. So instead he asks if she wants to dance.

She hesitates. Some Go-Go's song comes on over the gymnasium's sound system, and he gives her a look, angling his eyebrows up pleadingly.

“So long as you understand this is a dance as a *friend*,” she says firmly and he nods. She puts her hand out and he takes it, drawing her onto the floor.

“You know,” he says, smiling, “I usually just dance with my mother, so this is actually a huge step up for me in the social department.”

A reluctant grin breaks across her face, followed immediate by a caught bubble of laughter. She shakes her head and glances away.

“So who's that guy you came with?” he asks about halfway through the song. “Don't think I've seen him before.”

She checks to make sure he isn't asking out of jealousy, and he keeps his expression clear and open. Her hand firms on his shoulder. “He's just a guy I know, goes to UCLA.”

“Big guy,” he says, noncommittal and a little at a loss for what else to say.

“...He plays football.” She says it like a confession, which he finds pretty damn funny.

He dips her and says all scandalized, “A *football* player? Well, well. Look at Ali Mills. Never woulda guessed.”

She rolls her eyes, and this time her grin isn't reluctant at all, not even a little.

He's at the refreshments table, spitefully wondering what snack and drink combo he can get Susan that might turn her stomach, when someone knocks hard into his side. He steps away and looks over warily.

“Oh, *sorry*, Daniel,” says Tommy, laughing. He jockeys with the air down the table, scoping out the offerings. “Didn't see you there.”

“Uh huh,” he says.

He looks around to check if there is going to be any further incoming missile strikes, but the other Cobras are all across the gym, standing around in a group and laughing while their dates slump around a table, bored out of their minds. God, the waste; he feels so bad for girls sometimes. He lets his eyes slide over the tallest of the group without pausing and returns his attention to Tommy.

“So, how are you, Tommy?” he asks, aiming for the type of friendly tone that also clearly implies one is better than the person they're talking to; he's pretty good at this one and getting better by the day.

His message must be received, because Tommy's smile quiets to something cooler; still amused, though.

“Man, the funny thing is, you don't even know how lucky you are,” he says, shaking his head ruefully and ladling some punch into a cup. “You'd be dead right now if it wasn't for Johnny, and yet here you stand, acting like you did anything braver than running away from a fight.”

Daniel shoves his hands in the pockets of his slacks and tips his chin, doesn't let on the way his attention has sharpened and narrowed in like a laser beam. “Oh, yeah? And how exactly do you figure Johnny saved me from this terrible fate?”

“The *deal*, man.” Tommy leans his hip against the table and glances around before reaching into his jacket and taking out a flask, all while

continuing, perfectly conversational: “You backed out. Sensei was all ready to set us loose, but then Johnny told him he broke the truce, fucked the bet up.”

“He *did* break the truce,” says Daniel after a second of fruitlessly waiting for the other boy to realize the obvious problem with what he'd just said. “Like, multiple times.”

“Yeah,” says Tommy, like Daniel's the stupid one, “but he didn't have to *admit* it. Sensei wouldn't have asked. And the rest of us wouldn't've said shit."

Daniel narrows his eyes. “And you'd really have no problem coming after me, just because I didn't fight in that damn tournament?”

Tommy caps the flask and returns it to his jacket. He carefully agitates the cup in his hand, like the fruit punch and foul liquor needed to be stirred *juuust* right. Proto cocktail-sipping prick, thinks Daniel.

Tommy pushes off the table and sips the drink. Shrugs at the taste. He looks at Daniel and smiles wide and cold. “Hey – whatever Johnny says, goes.”

“You're pathetic,” says Daniel to his back, before he can think better of it. But it turns out fine – Tommy doesn't give a fuck what Daniel thinks of him.

Daniel watches him cross the dance floor back to his friends on the far side. He lets himself finally look at Johnny standing there in his dark tux.

As if his gaze carried some kind of weight to it, Johnny immediately turns his head and looks back, meeting his eyes across the room.

The semester is basically over, and Daniel is feeling restless and maybe a little invincible, or maybe that combo just means reckless? Either way, he looks at Johnny for a few seconds and then deliberately jerks his head to the side doors of the gymnasium. He turns away before he can get read Johnny's reaction, telling himself: if he chooses to ignore me, fine.

But Johnny doesn't ignore him.

Daniel looks over and shoves off the wall of the building the moment the door opens; it's not the first time he's done it, but third time's the charm. Johnny emerges from the building and looks around, starts walking when he spots Daniel.

He is handsome in his tux, the expensive black fabric smoothly fitted to his shoulders, the length of his arms. Between his impersonal styling and the blonde crew cut, he looks a lot like some kind of All-American hero, and nothing at all like himself: whoever that is, and Daniel doesn't really know.

A gaggle of gowned girls giggle past them on the sidewalk, hopping a little in their heels. They wait until they're out of earshot, and then they wait a little longer.

Daniel might say something right now: anything. He's pretty good at small talk. But talk between him and Johnny has never been very good at staying small, kind of an iceberg situation. So it feels a little pointless. The closest he can come is:

“How are you?” Because he wants to know. He has wanted to know for months. Some nights he's been pretty angry with himself about it; Johnny isn't his responsibility, or his fault.

“Pretty good,” says Johnny after thinking about it, and he'd say that no matter what, but he sounds like maybe he means it. He looks better, anyway. Solid.

Daniel tries to work out how he feels about this. Last semester, for a few short weeks, he couldn't be alone with Johnny without feeling owed his attention and touch, and what he wanted he generally got – or was given, perhaps. There's a different feeling when he looks at him now. Some kind of permission has been revoked: a door was closed but not by Daniel. Whatever unspoken understanding they used to have is gone, stamped out.

Despite this, when Johnny tilts his head under the buzzing outdoor lights of the building, he looks almost wistful.

“Hey," he says, like they've been talking for a while already, "you think you could've beat me?”

To an outsider observer, it would sound preposterous – who ever heard of a Goliath with an inferiority complex? Daniel doesn't sigh, but only because he's been doing a lot of thinking, and he's starting to come around to the idea he missed something crucial here. The

knowledge tastes sour on his tongue. Or maybe that's the aftertaste of the fruit punch.

“I don't know, man,” he says finally, scratching his eyebrow with his thumbnail to avoid quipping something self-deprecating, because that won't help any. He drops the hand and studies Johnny, feeling increasingly quizzical as he thinks about him again at that party in December.

“Why'd it mean so much to you, anyway?” he asks. He waves an arm, gesturing at – well. “I mean, you apparently already had *two* titles. So what gives?”

Johnny shrugs and kicks at the wall, idly dragging the sole of his polished dress shoe down the rough bricks. “Doesn't really matter now.”

“Oh, *jesus*,” says Daniel, fed up. “Come on, already. Can you please, for once, at least *pretend* you think I don't know what's going on with you? Because I don't, I never have. Not really."

This makes Johnny flinch slightly: the first crack in his armor in months. For a long moment, he doesn't look like he's going to respond. His mouth hooks up a little bitterly at the corner, and he looks out across the lawn and parking lot. But just as Daniel is about to relent, Johnny says:

“I thought. If I fought you and did my best, but I lost anyway, then – maybe it wouldn't've been so bad.” Johnny rolls his shoulder. Squints at him and knocks his head to the side like, *oh, you know.* “If you had me, I mean."

Daniel stares at him, wordless.

“But I'm good now,” says Johnny, and he seems like he believes it. There's a clarity to his eyes as he looks around the school grounds again. “I'm going to spend the summer training. My sensei told me about a couple adult tournaments, for after I turn eighteen? Next fall, I'm – it's going to be the real deal. Sweet shit.”

He mimes a couple slow punches in the air and kind of half-smirks at Daniel. When Daniel doesn't respond, Johnny lets the smirk drop and clears his throat. “Anyway, so – look, don't worry about it, man. It all worked out.”

“I'm, uh,” says Daniel, throat clicking, “happy to hear it.”

Johnny nods. He rocks back on his heels and his eyes swivel in their sockets, ostentatiously waiting. When Daniel says nothing more, he shrugs again. “Okay, well,” and he starts towards the doors.

“Johnny,” comes tripping off his tongue.

Johnny looks back over his shoulder, inquiring, and the thing is, it's too late. Daniel can see it in his eyes: he's made his choice. He belongs to something else.

But apparently he hadn't always, or there was a moment where Daniel might have—

“Good luck,” he says, and he lets him go.

Library

“We were thinking of going down to the beach,” says Ali, and Daniel is already nodding in agreement.

He'll die before he admits it aloud, but he is kind of okay with ending his high school career on a beach full of beautiful people as the sun sets over the Pacific Ocean. Like, that sounds fine.

They are leaving school for the final time and doing a pretty good job of acting cool about it. Other students are practically sprinting around in absurd theatrics of delight – but not them. They have dignity.

This is one of the only times Daniel has really regretted befriending girls.

“I'm going to swing by Mr. Miyagi's,” he says, a little distracted by the effervescent joy he sees all around him. “Should I meet you guys there or at Susan's house?” And he remembers to lean forward and smile sarcastically at Susan on Ali's other side.

Ali casually elbows Susan, who makes an angry noise but falls back a couple inches. “How late do you think you'll be?” And when Daniel shrugs, she says decisively, “Just meet us there.”

They hit a corner and split off, and Daniel heads down the hallway to his locker. It's unlikely there is anything inside he gives a damn about keeping, but he figures he should check anyway; maybe he put one of the nice pens in there the first day of school?

It takes him four tries to get the combination right, and then the inside of the locker is about as worthless as he figured: practically cobwebs – except for a bright yellow paper airplane resting atop a stack of old physics handouts.

He lifts the airplane out of the locker. It's folded down, a little crumpled and the nose is bent. It almost looks like someone tried to shove it through the grate of the door – and he supposes they must've, after thinking about it for a second.

He unfolds the plane and blinks down at a flyer for a baseball game from three weeks previous. He turns the page over and bemusedly reads the sloppy numbers scrawled in large print on the other side.

Daniel cranes his head down either side of the empty hallway around him, like someone might jump around a corner with an explanation; this doesn't happen. He looks back at the page. After a few seconds, something in his brain shifts, and he finally realizes he is looking at a pair of library call numbers.

The school is completely deserted, the hallways strewn with papers and a lingering sense of relief from all quarters. No one stops him from walking into the school library.

He weaves a determined path through the empty tables. His footsteps are muffled by the carpet. He always liked how quiet it was in here – the only properly quiet room in the entire school. It had been a weird comfort last fall: at least this room was the same as the school library back home.

He doesn't quite understand why this comforting quiet now makes his throat tight.

He looks again at the call numbers on the page in his hand, even though he doesn't really need to, and he heads to the far end of the library: that corner that always felt a little cut off from everything else. Stand the right way, and maybe no one could see you.

He follows the reassuring vertebrae of books, and his fingers trip as they travel from stiff hardcover to something softer, worn. He doesn't need to check the spine or call number to know it doesn't belong in the collection.

Daniel slides the book from the shelf. He blinks down at the creased cover, stamped by someone in the past as *used*.

DANIEL is written in his customary terse script on the inside cover. The rest of the note is cramped and difficult to make out, like maybe Johnny tried to write like a normal person and proceeded to fail spectacularly.

Daniel instinctively glances backwards, checking that the empty library is still definitely empty. It is.

He wanders dumbly along the couple feet it takes so he can lean against the flat end of the row. He slowly slides down until he is sitting on the floor, knees bracing the book against his chest, and he reads the rest of the note in the hushed silence of a library at the end of a term.

Before you ask – Ms Wampler mentioned it once in the 10th grade. It stuck in my head for some reason. When I tried to think of a book to get, it was the only one that came to mind. Look don't think to much about it? I started reading it and it was actually really fucking boring. The main guy is annoying. He whines a lot. Total pussy. I didn't get far, maybe it gets better. You'll have to tell me. Sorry

He hadn't signed it.

Daniel swallows and bites his tongue. He adjusts his posture and turns a page to read the book's inscription.

Dedicated to a Happier Year.

He twists around on some sudden sharp instinct, ducking his shoulders and head around to peer along the length of the library stack because – surely—?

But no one is there. The room is empty; the school itself might even be empty. No one wants to be here anymore – he can move or do as he pleases, and no one will have a single thing to say about it. Everyone has better things to do with their time. That California sun awaits, after all.

And it awaits him too – he has ahead of him an evening of rolling tides and salty breeze and warm laughter. It is everything anyone could hope for. And he is going to go – of course he is. He won't let his friends down.

But it's still only the early afternoon. He has time to pretend the world is different: more time than some people.

Daniel settles the book in his lap. He thinks about Johnny maybe trying to read in a similar position at some point in the past and makes himself catch a laugh instead of a sob. A moment or twenty passes, and no one else is there to give testimony about what it looks like from the outside.

Eventually, Daniel inhales deep and sets his head in place against the stack. He looks down and turns a page, and he starts to read.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!